

RETURNING TO WORK POST MATERNITY LEAVES

A study of well-educated women's experiences in Finland

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to further our understanding of the employed women's experiences of returning to work after their maternity leaves. In particular, I will look into the experiences of well-educated working mothers in Finland. While Finland has traditionally enjoyed a high level of women's engagement in paid work, there are few studies concerning their experiences of going back to paid work post maternity leaves in the country. In the broader literature, currently, studies on the topic seem to be insufficient and fragmented, too. Therefore, this thesis attempts to enrich the academic discussion of the topic and hopefully build a solid base for future policies and practices to better facilitate the mothers' and women's working.

In order to answer the research question of *How do well-educated employed mothers in Finland experience and manage returning to work post maternity leaves?*, this thesis is conducted as a qualitative interview study. Specifically, eight in-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eight university-graduated Finnish women who have returned to work for less than two years after their maternity leaves to produce data for the study. The interviews' transcripts were then analyzed using the thematic analysis method.

In the end, five prevalent themes of the well-educated women's experiences of returning to work post maternity leaves in Finland were identified, namely: (1) *The Simultaneous Sense Of Sorrow And Joy*, (2) *The Enablers For Mothers' Working In Finland*, (3) *The Time Management*, (4) *The Sense Of Guilt*, and (5) *Work And Home Benefit Each Other*.

Keywords return to work, maternity leave, mothers, women

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1. Background & Problem Setting.....	1
1.2. Research Objectives & Research Question	4
1.3. Structure Of The Thesis.....	5
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	6
2.1. The Finnish Context	6
2.1.1 Women and mothers' active involvement in paid work in Finland	6
2.1.2. Extensive family policies in Finland	8
2.2. The Women's Experiences Of Returning To Work Post Maternity Leaves	12
2.2.1. The mothers' decisions of returning to paid employment.....	12
2.2.2. The working mothers' experiences in the public sphere	15
2.2.3. The working mothers' experiences in the private sphere	19
2.3. Conceptual Framework.....	23
3. DATA AND METHODS.....	26
3.1. The Qualitative Methodology.....	26
3.2. Data Production	27
3.3. Data Analysis.....	32
3.4. Research Evaluation	35
4. FINDINGS.....	38
4.1. The Simultaneous Sense Of Sorrow And Joy	38
4.2. The Enablers For Mothers' Working In Finland	41
4.2.1. The childcare arrangement	41

4.2.2. The organizations' support	43
4.2.3. The husband's/ partner's support	48
4.3. The Time Management.....	52
4.4. The Sense Of Guilt	56
4.5. Work And Home Benefit Each Other.....	60
4.6. Summary Of Findings	62
5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS	64
REFERENCES	71
APPENDIX	82

1. INTRODUCTION

This master's thesis concerns well-educated employed women's experiences of returning to work post maternity leaves in Finland. Prior to further investigating into the topic, this introductory chapter will outline the background as well as define the research objective and question of the study. In addition, the overall structure of this thesis will be presented at the end of this chapter.

1.1. Background & Problem Setting

Women are getting more and more actively involved in the workforce and constitute a valuable source of talent nowadays. Globally, the Nordic states are known to be the forerunners in gender equality and among those with the highest women's participation rate in the labor force. In 2016, it is estimated that 7 out of 10 women (within the age range from 15 to 64) in these states were in paid employment, while the corresponding figure of the EU-28 was 5 out of 10 (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2017). This growth in women's engaging in paid employment is largely attributed to progress in equal education and low social restrictions, e.g., gender roles ideologies, societal attitude and norms, etc., regarding women taking up paid work in these countries (International Labor Office, 2018). With special regards to the case of Finland, women in this Nordic state are generally highly educated and have historically long been working alongside men (Salin et al., 2018). To date, more women than men hold tertiary level degrees in Finland, and they make up almost half of the national active labor force (Statistics Finland, 2018). As a result, having women participating in the labor market could bring about crucial economic benefits as they do not only add to the labor supply of the country in a simple manner, but also provide valuable knowledge and skills to improve job matching and economic productivity (Esteve-Volart, 2004; Hsieh et al., 2013; OECD, 2015; OECD, 2018). Additionally, it is argued that having women in employment in specific and gender equality in general are also matters of human rights and could positively influence the society at large, e.g., reducing income inequality, strengthening inclusiveness, enhancing trust and happiness, etc.

(OECD, 2015; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2018). As women's working in paid employment rises in importance, their experiences at work and wellbeing receive increasing attention.

Different aspects related to the women's working have been of interest of both policy-makers and academics alike. International institutions like the United Nations (UN) or the European Union (EU) have established legislation, guidelines and recommendations concerning equality issues with particular regards to anti-discriminations based on sex, to equal pay, to gender balance in decision-making positions, etc. (The Declaration of Human Rights, 1948; European Commission, n.d.). Based on such legislation, Finland also builds its national laws and policies to enable women's working, and to protect them from health and safety hazards at work as well as discriminations. For example, the Finnish *Act on Non-Discrimination* and *Act on Equality between Women and Men* in the Labor Law (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, n.d.) mandate that men and women are to be treated equally in recruitment, at work and in remuneration. Discriminations against pregnancy or parenthood are illegal (The City of Helsinki, 2019). In addition, the country also has a thorough and extensive paid family-related leaves and childcare system to enable both sexes, and especially women, working (Crompton & Lyonette, 2006; Meriläinen et al., 2009; Välimäki et al., 2009; Ellingsæter, 2014). As for the academic side, researchers have studied the realization and effectiveness of such policies (Bittman, 1999; Rønsen & Sundström, 2002; Ellingsæter, 2014; Krapf, 2014), work-life balance and integration (Clark, 2000; Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Jones, 2012; Weber & Cissna-Health, 2015), women in leadership and glass ceiling issue (Moe, 2005; Moe & Shandy, 2010), etc. Among those studies, a specific stream in the literature concerning the employed women's experiences upon becoming mothers could be identified. Becoming a mother is known as a major milestone that greatly influences the women's lives, and thus worths investigating. Besides experiencing possible health and wellbeing issues, women share that their priorities after having children often change and this forces them to re-evaluate their career as well as family roles (Bailey, 2000). Moreover, it has also been reported in the literature like in Podder and Poder's (2015) study concerning the women's experiences in Finland, Sweden and Estonia that the journey of women's returning to work after childbirth and maternity leaves is not an easy one. Adding to the discussion, this thesis looks specifically into the employed women's experiences upon returning to paid employment after maternity leaves.

As said, the women often find it challenging to go back to work after childbirth and maternity leaves (Podder & Poder, 2015). During this time, women do not only have to juggle different roles' demands (i.e., as a mother, a wife, and an employee) (Clark, 2000; Tammelin, 2009; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Alstveit et al., 2011; Weber & Cissna-Health, 2015), but could also face new challenges at work like the discriminations against motherhood (Houston & Marks, 2003; Williams, 2004; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Jones, 2012; Gatrell, 2013; Aarts, 2016; Tai, 2017), the pay reduction (Hofferth & Curtin, 2003; Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Ejrnæs & Kunze, 2013), the lack of support from organizations for parenthood (Stone, 2007; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Fiksenbaum 2014; Pedulla & Thebaud, 2015), etc. In addition, working mothers could experience guilt and/or be criticized for working and not spending enough time with their young children (Tammelin, 2009; Jones, 2012; Borelli et al., 2017; Linton, 2019). Therefore, it is critical to understand this special phase of the women's life and careers (i.e., when they return to work after childbirth and maternity leaves) in order to provide the women with necessary aids and create meaningful organizational and societal changes. The smoother the re-entry is, the more likely the women are to perform highly at work and the less likely they are to drop out. Hence, organizations can better use their human resources and avoid costs from employees' inefficiency or turnover. Furthermore, understanding and tending to the women's experiences could help heighten companies' and organizations' employer brands and attract female talents. Likewise, with better understanding of the women's experiences, authorities and institutions can further their support. Unfortunately, much as studying about the women's return to work post childbirth and maternity leaves is essential, studies on the matter appear to be inadequate.

Studies concern the women's return to work after becoming a parent appears to be insufficient and fragmented. In the current body of literature, there have been vigorous study attempts that looked into different factors like education level, work history, financial drives, (Klerman & Leibowitz, 1990; Houston & Marks, 2003; Fazeer, 2014; Lu et al., 2017) childcare (Klerman & Leibowitz, 1990; Barrow, 1999; Gregory, 2011; Boyd et al., 2013; Murray, 2015), self-fulfillment need (Tai, 2017), anticipated level of support from work (Houston & Marks, 2003; Stone, 2007; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Öun et al., 2010; Fazeer, 2014), etc. that influence the mothers' return to work post maternity leaves likelihood. Besides, studies on the household

labor division affecting the mothers' working and careers (Tammelin, 2009; Cheung & Halpern, 2010), mothers' struggles at the workplace (Houston & Marks, 2003; Williams, 2004; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Jones, 2012; Gatrell, 2013; Aarts, 2016; Tai, 2017), as well as the work-life integration issues of working mothers (Stone, 2007; Halpern & Cheung, 2008; Alstveit et al., 2011; Weber & Cissna-Health, 2015) are also found. As can be seen, except for studies in the first theme of different factors affecting the women's decisions to return to work post maternity leaves, most of the existing studies place more emphasis on the longer timeline of a woman's life and career instead of focusing on the shorter time period of when the women have just gone back to work after their childbirth and maternity leaves. In addition, while these studies offer valuable insight into the life of working mothers, they are more like pieces of the puzzle rather than portraying the whole picture of the women's reality (in a specific context). Therefore, I argue that our understanding of the women's experiences during the sensitive period of returning to work post maternity leaves (e.g., what happened at work and at home as well as how the women managed them) is still lacking, and the topic should be further explored. This study attempts to enrich the discussion of this topic by looking at the working mothers' experiences in the context of Finland. Currently, studies of the women's experiences of going back to paid work post maternity leaves in Finland is scarce.

1.2. Research Objectives & Research Question

Due to the importance of their participation in the labor force to the economic and social aspects of a society, it is necessary to enable the women (including mothers) to work. I argue that the period when women have just re-entered the workplace after becoming a parent and taking maternity leaves is a sensitive period filled with challenges and could significantly influence the mothers' career. Therefore, understanding what actually happens during this time is vital for organizations and the society to assist working mothers and further enable women's working. Hence, with this thesis, I aim to contribute to further our understanding of the women's experiences of going back to paid employment after a period being out of the workforce for childbirth and maternity leaves. Particularly, I will look into the experiences of well-educated working mothers in Finland, where women usually engage actively in paid work (Pfau-Effinger,

1993; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2012; Salin et al., 2018). Accordingly, the research question for this study is set as follows:

How do well-educated employed mothers in Finland experience and manage returning to work post maternity leaves?

To specify, the term *maternity leaves* used in this thesis refers to the combination of paid maternity leave, possible paid parental leave (whole or parts) and possible paid childcare leave (whole or parts) taken by mothers in Finland.

1.3. Structure Of The Thesis

Having introduced the study, this thesis will proceed with four chapters. In Chapter 2, I build a conceptual framework for this study by examining the context of my study, i.e., Finland, and critically reviewing existing literature surrounding the decision of returning to paid employment after maternity leaves of mothers, as well as the experiences of working mothers at the workplace and at home. Next in Chapter 3, I will explain my methodological choices covering the qualitative research approach, the data production and analysis strategies, and an evaluation of this study. After that in Chapter 4, I will present the findings of my research. Finally, in Chapter 5, I will discuss such findings against prior studies, outline its practical implications and propose suggestions for future studies interested in this topic.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, the literature on the experiences of women when they returned to work after maternity leaves will be reviewed with particular regards to the case of Finland. First, Finland as the context for this study will be examined under the section of *The Finnish Context* to establish the background for the study. Then the women's decision of going back to paid employment after periods of paid leaves for childbirth and childcare, as well as different issues the women encountered both in the work life and the home life as portrayed in existing studies will be presented under the section of *The Women's Experiences Of Returning To Work Post Maternity Leaves*. Finally, the conceptual framework for this thesis will be introduced.

2.1. The Finnish Context

Since this study concerns the experiences of mothers in Finland of their returning to work post maternity leaves, the context of Finland will first be introduced. Notably, the country has been known for having a high proportion of women and mothers working in paid employment, and for having friendly family policies to help women reconcile their work and home life.

2.1.1 Women and mothers' active involvement in paid work in Finland

Women, including mothers, in Finland have a long tradition of being highly active in the labor market. In 2017, women accounted for over 48% (i.e., approximately 2 048 thousand individuals) of the total active labor force in Finland with the employment rate of 68.5% comparing to 70.7% of men's. This employment rate of women was slightly higher than the average of the EU-28 countries of 66.5%. Moreover, the majority of these women (78.4%) were in full-time jobs. In other words, only around 21% of the women were working part-time. This rate is much lower than the average of 31.7% of the EU-28 countries. The main reasons for women's undertaking part-time work were combining working with studying (25.3%, 2017) or not having found a full-time job (32%, 2017) rather than for childcare (11.8%, 2017). A similar

situation was identified for men with the breakdowns of 34.4%, 29.7% and 1% respectively. Considering the employment rate of parents (from 20 to 59 years of age) of small children (i.e., under 3 years old), 51% of mothers were in employment in 2017. This number was lower than that of fathers' being 89.7%, yet improved as the children grew older. (Statistics Finland, 2018) This women's and mothers' active involvement in the labor market in general and in full-time work in specific could be traced back to the socio-economic historical developments which formed the egalitarian gender attitude of the country.

Women in Finland have been working alongside men since the dawn of time. Traditionally, Finland was an agrarian country. However, unlike other agrarian countries of the time where each family was crowded and extra laborers were available from other landless families, Finnish families were smaller with fewer children. As a result, women had to participate in farming and economic activities together with men to earn the livings for their families (Pfau-Effinger, 1993). Later on during the first and second World Wars, women were the main workforce in the society as men were on the battlefield. After the war years, once again women were needed in the reconstruction of the nation's economy (Anttonen, 1994; Julkunen, 1994) as cited by Lammi-Taskula (2008) during the 1950s. The industrialization, the main drive for labor division into men being the breadwinners while women taking care of the home for many countries (Klein et al., 2007; Scott, 2009; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2012), took place slowly and was overshadowed by the traditional agrarian system in Finland, i.e., the majority of the population was still engaged in agrarian activities like before. Up until the late 1960s, the Finnish economy rapidly grew towards the service sector where the roles and importance of women were valued. (Pfau-Effinger, 1993; Välimäki et al., 2009; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2012) The work of Pfau-Effinger (1993) could be regarded as a classic exploring this phenomenon from the socio-economic historical perspectives and offers greater details on the subject. As can be seen from the outlined historical movements, women's and mothers' engaging in full-time paid work was not an exceptional case in Finland, and this helped push the gender equality view in the country. In fact, women's and mothers' working full-time alongside men is considered as the norm in the Finnish society (Pfau-Effinger, 1993; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2012; Salin et al., 2018).

In spite of full-time work being the norm, Finnish society seems to be witnessing a change in its full-time/ part-time employment landscape. According to Statistics Finland (2018), the proportion of women (17-74 years of age) in part-time job in Finland had been on the rise since 2000 to 2017 from 16.9% to 21%. A similar trend was observed for men, yet the margin of change was smaller, i.e., from 7.2% in 2000 to 9.8% in 2017. Further examining the patterns in undertaking part-time jobs in Finland, it is reported that studying and being not able to find a full-time job were the primary reasons (accounted for 60% of the explanations) for working part-time for both women and men in Finland in 2017. Childcare as the reason was only mentioned by 11.8% of women and 1% of men. Therefore, it could be inferred that the majority of mothers take up full-time jobs when they return to work after maternity leaves, just like childless women do, in Finland.

In addition to the established tradition and norms of women's working in paid jobs and the equal gender view of the country, the activeness of mothers in the labor force in Finland is made possible thanks to the state's friendly family policies. The next subsection will discuss these policies further.

2.1.2. Extensive family policies in Finland

Besides the long tradition of women's working in full-time paid jobs and the egalitarian gender attitude, the active participation of women and mothers in the labor force in Finland is facilitated by the friendly extensive family policies of the country, i.e., paid leaves and childcare support. With regards to paid family leaves, there are four main types of leaves: maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, and childcare leave. The first three leaves will be discussed below while childcare leave will be discussed later under the overarching topic of childcare support. Table 1 summarizes these four paid leave types in Finland.

Leave type	Entitled parent(s)	Duration	Start time	Compensation level
<i>Maternity leave</i>	Mothers	105 workdays	From 50-30 working days before the expected due date	Up to 70% of previous gross earnings
<i>Paternity leave</i>	Fathers	54 workdays	Fathers can choose to stay at home up to 18 weekdays at the same time as the child's mother. The rest of the paternity leave must be taken after the parental leave. Otherwise, fathers can use the whole leave after the parental leave.	
<i>Parental leave</i>	Both	158 workdays	Right after the maternity leave	
<i>Childcare leave</i>	Both, yet only one at a time if taken full-time	Until the child is 3 years old	Right after parental leave & if the child is not in daycare services	Care allowance (independent from family income) from €338.34 /month/ child. Adjusted for the number and ages of children. Child supplement (dependent on family income), upto €181.07 /month for one child only

Table 1: Family paid leaves in Finland, valid as of April 2019 (Kela, 2017; 2018; 2019)

As said, I will first outline the current basic family paid leaves, i.e., maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave in Finland. Under normal circumstances, paid maternity leave is

reserved for the mothers from the final months of their pregnancy and lasts for 105 workdays or around four months. During this time, mothers can be compensated up to 70% of their regular gross earnings and be secured of employment. (Kela, 2018) On top of that, mothers can also take up paid parental leave of 158 workdays or around six months (alone or divide it with their partners, full-time or part-time) right after the maternity leave and have a similar parental allowance from the state. In addition to paid leaves for mothers, fathers in Finland are entitled to paid paternity leave, too. According to Kela (2019), paternity leave can be taken for up to 54 workdays, of which the first 18 workdays can be used during the maternity or parental leave period of the mothers. The rest of the leave (or all of it if the fathers do not spend the first 18 workdays as said) must be used after the parental leave and before the child turns two years old; otherwise, fathers will forfeit their leaves. During their leaves, the fathers can receive an allowance of up to 70% of their normal gross earning. In addition to these leaves, parents can also choose to take childcare leave, i.e., stay at home to look after the child, once the parental leave ends should the child is not in municipal or private daycare (Kela, 2017). This childcare leave will be further discussed below under the topic of childcare support.

Second, I will highlight different current childcare support means in Finland. Similar to other Nordic countries, Finland offers universal childcare for children under the age of six (school age), i.e., all children whose parents want to use childcare services can attend public, public subsidized or private daycare. Daycare centers in Finland are generally highly evaluated by both parents and teachers (Hujala et al., 2012). The state either pay for these services or give certain allowance for parents to pay for these services. (Kela, 2017). Childcare cost in Finland was estimated to cost around 7% of the average net income of a family here (Krapf, 2014). While daycare centers in Finland are universal and of good quality, they could not provide spaces for everybody. Plus, parents could have their own reasons for not enrolling their children with daycare services. In those cases, a childcare leave could be taken full-time by either parent (but not at the same time) or taken part-time between the parents. When a childcare leave is taken, the parents will receive a fix care allowance and a care supplement for each of the under school-age child. For example, the parents will receive EUR 338.34 per month for one child under three years old as a care allowance, and a maximum of EUR 181.07 per month depending on their family gross income paid to only one child. The home municipal of the family may also pay a

separate municipal supplement for childcare. (Kela, 2017) More information on family policies can be accessed from the website of the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela) at www.kela.fi.

As can be seen, the family policies in Finland are built extensive and relatively flexible to enable women in Finland to combine work and family life as well as pursue their professional careers if they wish to (Crompton & Lyonette, 2006; Välimäki et al., 2009; Ellingsæter, 2014). On the one hand, these policies should help strengthen the tie between the mothers with the labor market, allow mothers to work (full or part-time) while lessening the childcare and domestic work burden on them by encouraging fathers to participate in those activities. On the other hand, the policies are believed to also allow mothers to choose their own paths, i.e., whether they would like to become stay at home mothers or keep on working professionally. The available data and studies on the parents' use of family policies could provide a glimpse into their lives and experiences as well as the Finnish society.

Although the mentioned family policies could have tremendous benefits for both parents and especially women, the realizations of them are not spotless. According to Statistics Finland (2018), taking family leaves in Finland was not met with significant obstacles from 2001-2017 in general. Nevertheless, there were still certain issues: (1) it was harder to obtain family leaves in the private sector than the public one; (2) fathers found it more difficult than mothers to get family leaves, especially in the private sector (10-30% points in difference); and (3) arranging part-time leaves were markedly challenging. These issues, though have been bettered with time, could signal remaining matters of gender equality. Additionally, the difficulty in arranging part-time leaves/ employments could also be seen as an indication of the full-time work tradition and preference in the country in line with studies like Närvi's (2012) one. Furthermore, studies of paid leaves have discovered a gendered practice in paid leave usages in Finland. More women take up parental leaves than men (Lammi-Taskula, 2007; Lammi-Taskula, 2008; Salin et al., 2018). Similarly, more women undertake childcare leave in Finland, too.

Once the paid leaves are over, it is common for mothers in Finland return to (full-time) work as previously discussed. However, this return of mothers was characterized as problematic (Podder & Poder, 2015).

2.2. The Women's Experiences Of Returning To Work Post Maternity Leaves

Different aspects of the women's experiences when returning to work after maternity leaves have been recorded in literature. Similar to women in other countries, women in Finland have also expressed concerns regarding going back to work after a career break period due to childbirth and childcare (Podder & Poder, 2015). For this discussion, I will depart from the decision-making point where the mothers decided to return to the workforce after their maternity leaves. Then I will continue to portray their experiences at work and of being a working mother, as well as how working mothers manage different circumstances in their work and family life. The underlying issues of gender and roles ideologies are argued to be an important constituent of the mothers' experiences in this study and will be highlighted throughout the literature discussion.

2.2.1. The mothers' decisions of returning to paid employment

The journey of the women's returning to work post maternity leaves starts from the point where they made that decision. This subsection discusses the literature and issues surrounding this decision to go back to work of the women. In specific, studies have confirmed that society's ideologies of gender roles as well as mother's roles, and its level of support of women working have great influences on this decision of mothers.

A society's role ideologies refer to how a culture views the importance, the appropriate tasks and behaviors of its members in different situations. In other words, these ideologies dictate what the norms the society are. These role ideologies are usually deeply entrenched within the members of a society due to their socialization process, and thus can shape their thinking,

behaviors and practices, etc. The gender role ideology concerns the norms for men and women, while the father- and motherhood ideologies regard the norms for fathers and mothers in a family. Hence, it is argued that the labor market practices of women, e.g., their decision to go back to work, were under the influences of these ideologies, too. (Fagan, 2001; Pfau-Effinger, 2004; Crompton, 2006; Lewis et al., 2008; Gregory, 2011; Salin et al., 2018).

For countries with the traditional gender ideology of men being the breadwinners and women being the caregivers, it is found that women are more likely to stay at home after giving birth to take care of the children full-time, or only work part-time. Meanwhile, men continue to engage mostly in paid work instead of childcare and other domestic work (*ibid*). However, since Finland has a long tradition of women taking part in full-time paid work, the country holds a more egalitarian view regarding gender roles as well as father's and mother's roles. In fact, Finland (together with other Nordic countries) is considered to have the least traditional societal gender role ideology in the world. In Finland, it is common to encounter the dual-earner family model where both parents take part in paid work and share domestic work beside the traditional view and model on labor division (Wierda-Boera et al., 2009; Edlund & Öun 2016; Knight & Brinton 2017; Salin et al., 2018). It is estimated that mothers in Finland stay on family leave for 1.5-2 years per child on average (Salmi et al., 2009) as cited in Närvi (2012). After that, most of them return to their full-time employment, especially if they had had a higher career status prior to childbirth (Lammi-Taskula, 2008; Närvi, 2012; Käsälä & Oinas, 2015). Paid work is considered as an important part in life of women in Finland (Lehto & Sutela, 2009) as cited by Närvi (2012). In addition to societal role ideologies, the women's decision to go back to work after maternity leaves also relates to the level of support they receive from their home and from the society.

Support from her own home and the social system is important in a mother's deciding to return to work after maternity leaves. Within her home, the role of the spouse is crucial. Not only would he provide the mother with mental support, but he could also help with domestic work, allowing the mother to focus more on paid work (Välimäki et al., 2009). Gender and parenthood role ideologies once again were observed as having taken place here. According to Lammi-

Taskula's (2008) study, when a father is critical towards the prevailing hegemony of mother-care and supports equal-parenting, he tends to take paid family leave to care for the child as well as engage in other unpaid work at home. Besides, the help from extended family members, communities or commercial services with childcare and housework would encourage mothers to return to work after maternity leaves (Moe & Shandy, 2010; Wiese & Heidemeier, 2012). On the society level, childcare usually emerges in literature as a paramount concern and central issue for mothers' returning to work decision. Specifically, when considering going back to work, mothers would carefully look at the quality, availability and affordability of (private and public) childcare alternatives offered to her (Klerman & Leibowitz, 1990; Barrow, 1999; Gregory, 2011; Boyd et al., 2013; Murray, 2015). In multiple contexts (for instance: the US and Australia), it is the steep childcare cost that discourages mothers from getting back to work. Mothers in Gregory's (2011) study directly raised the question of whether going back to work worth it since the childcare cost was similar to or higher than their wages. In such cases, mothers often stay at home to take care of their children. The impact of gender relations in the household and society can be seen throughout these studies in the sense that it is the mother who usually becomes the stay at home parent and takes responsibility for child rearing. In the context of Finland, however, high-quality childcare is universal and subsidized by the state. Thus, this could eliminate the burden of childcare on the households and mothers significantly should the mothers wish to go back to employment.

In conclusion, the decision of whether to go back to work after maternity leaves of mothers is largely influenced by the society's held ideologies of gender, mother's, and father's roles as well as the degree of support mothers receive if they want to pursue their careers. Due to Finland's tradition of women's engaging in paid work, egalitarian take on gender as well as father's - mother's roles, and supportive policies and systems, a great number of mothers in this Nordic state return to employment after their maternity leaves.

2.2.2. The working mothers' experiences in the public sphere

Different literature has explored the working mothers' experiences in the public sphere, i.e., at the workplace, when they are back to paid employment after maternity leaves. It is often the case that the experiences are not as bright as one may expect, i.e., working mothers could encounter some forms of disadvantages at work due to their newly acquired motherhood status and receive insufficient support from their workplace and managers.

Regarding their disadvantages, working mothers have reported facing the maternal wall and/or the motherhood wage penalty that call for managing strategies from the women themselves. Maternal wall, to put simple, refers to the discriminating biases held against working mothers due to their childcare and family responsibilities (Moe & Shandy, 2010: 52-58). In other words, these biases largely derive from the traditional gender ideology that women are the caregivers in the family while men are the breadwinners (Pedulla & Thebaud, 2015). For example, employers and colleagues tend to stereotype that women after becoming mothers would commit less to work (i.e., spend less time and effort on work), do not want to take demanding work tasks or participate in after work get-togethers or meetings, etc. (Williams, 2004; Moe & Shandy, 2010). The fact that many women opt for a more flexible work arrangement after childbirth, either to better manage their work-family balance or because they cannot find full-time positions, unfortunately strengthens these stereotypes. Moreover, some people (unconsciously and falsely) believe that women's competence declines when they are pregnant and become mothers (Annandale & Clark, 1996; Witz, 2000; Tai, 2017). As can be seen, those biases contrast with the typical image of an ideal employee: being competent, showing up at work, being available to work long hours and travel upon (immediate) request, being available for after-work activities, etc. (Williams, 2000; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Jones, 2012). Upon closer examination, such notions of constant visibility and ideal employee image are in fact gendered, i.e., characterizing traits often found in male employees (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Jones, 2012; Lupu, 2012). As a result, many women find themselves being punished for their (hard-earned) flexible work arrangements and their new mother status. For example, working mothers reported being marginalized or made redundant at work; being refused of promotion, demoted or denied access to important assignments; suffering reduced

access to training, receiving a lower pay, being excluded from social or networking activities, etc. upon their returning to work after childbirth and maternity leaves (Houston & Marks, 2003; Jones, 2012; Gatrell, 2013; Aarts, 2016; Tai, 2017). To make matter worse, some women also reported having encountered the maternal wall stemming from the benevolent acts of the companies assuming that women want and/or need to spend more time with their children (Williams, 2004; Tai, 2017). This traditional view on gender roles is common in countries like the US, Germany, the Netherlands, or Australia where most maternal wall related studies were conducted. Besides the maternal wall, it is well-documented in literature that mothers are also met with a reduction in wage upon returning to work post maternity leaves (Hofferth & Curtin, 2003; Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Ejrnæs & Kunze, 2013).

Numerous studies concerning the reduction in pay that women suffer when going back to work after childbirth and maternity leaves exist in literature. In fact, Hersch and Stratton (2000) used the term motherhood wage penalty to describe the phenomenon that “*mothers earn less than women without children and less than men in general*” (cited by Cheung & Halpern, 2010: 183). A part of this earning gap can be attributed to the reduced working hours of mothers due to part-time or shorter workday arrangements. Yet, the remaining differences in pay are more challenging to justify. Many researchers and practitioners alike believe that discriminations against mothers should be the explanation for this phenomenon. In fact, evidence of the discrimination in the mothers’ wage was picked up in different societies like the US and Germany by researchers like Hofferth and Curtin (2003), Moe and Shandy (2010), Ejrnæs and Kunze (2013), etc. in their studies. On the contrary, it appears that men generally are better valued and enjoy a raise in wage after becoming husbands and fathers. This phenomenon is known as the marriage premium for men (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). Hence, having anticipated or encountered these different disadvantages at work, women naturally seek to manage their situations when returning to the workplace post maternity leaves.

In spite of a lack of study about this topic, some strategies for working mothers to mitigate the disadvantages associated with motherhood at work can be inferred from the literature. Gatrell (2013) discovered that some women strategically planned ahead to secure their positions at

work after maternity leaves by developing irreplaceable valuable skills and/or resources at work. For example, one woman grew her expertise in a specific law area while another invested in a close relationship with a major client of the company. Moreover, some women deliberately invited their colleagues and/or business partners to work meetings at their houses, and thus redefine the concept of work and work environment, strengthen the egalitarian role ideology, as well as reinstate their commitment and capability as a professional in the process. Additionally, Eve (2007) and Yerkes et al. (2010) suggested that women should not take too long with their maternity leaves to ensure a smooth transition back to work without significant penalties in the long term. On top of the women's efforts, the support from the workplace (or lack thereof) plays an important role in the working mothers' experiences at the workplace when they return to employment from maternity leaves.

Support from the workplace could comprise both formal policies and programs and informal means. Some important formal policies and programs that facilitate mothers' working are flexible working options, health and safety protections, breastfeeding break entitlement and facilities, on-site childcare, protection against discrimination and dismissal (Öun et al., 2010). Among the policies, having flexible work options, e.g., shorter workday, part-time work, remote work, etc., is argued to be crucial in allowing women to combine work and family, and the failure to obtain such an arrangement could force women to scale back their career or opt-out of the workforce eventually (Stone, 2007; Moe & Shandy, 2010). However, even though all these formal support means are essential, they are noted to be either missing from the workplace in many countries or not as effective as desired (Stone, 2007; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Fiksenbaum 2014; Pedulla & Thebaud, 2015). Adding to the discussion of support at work, some researchers placed more emphasis on informal support means. Workplace culture, e.g., shared values, (gender) roles ideologies, norms, managerial support, etc., is claimed to have greater influences on the experiences of working mothers at work than formal policies and programs (Wayne et al., 2006; Premeaux et al., 2007; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Fiksenbaum, 2014; Pedulla & Thebaud, 2015; Wayne & Casper, 2016). In other words, a woman's experience would be more positive if the workplace practices a more equal gender and family-friendly view and behaviors. Similarly, the role of managers (including their attitudes and behaviors towards working mothers) as facilitators for mothers' working and the role of mentors at work was highlighted

in studies like Hill's (2005), Lupu's (2012), Weber and Cissna-Health's (2015), Clark et al.'s, (2017) and Tai's (2017). Nonetheless, it is often observed in practice that: the work culture is heavily male-oriented (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Jones, 2012; Lupu, 2012; Galy-Badenas & Croucher, 2016), the managers are unsupportive of the working mother's circumstances when home-work spillovers happen (Clark, 2000; Tai, 2017), and the mentoring is weak in effectiveness (Lupu, 2012). Some positive experiences at work of mothers, e.g., where the organizational culture and managers are supportive, can still be found (like those mentioned in Moe and Shandy's (2010) study). However, these cases seem to be outnumbered by the negative ones and only roughly portrayed in the literature. As can be seen from the presented discussion so far, the society's traditional view on gender roles where women are seen more fitted as homemakers and men are breadwinners could dictate the norms and practices at the workplace to be unfavorable towards the mothers' working and thus cause the negative experiences of the women at work. Given the high level of gender equality and long tradition of women's engaging in paid work in Finland, one could expect that working mothers' experiences are more positive in the country. Unfortunately, statistics and studies conducted in the country have more to tell.

Statistics and studies have reported similar issues faced by working mothers in Finland as founded elsewhere, and yet at the same time introducing interesting new aspects of the topic. Certain disadvantages brought about by motherhood still exist in this Nordic state. While there are no statistics specifically about mothers' experiences, data about women's experiences at work in Finland could provide cues leading to the mothers' situations. According to Statistics Finland (2018), 70% of women when being surveyed ranked the gender equality at their workplace as good while only 8% ranked it as poor in the year 2017. Similar figures, 78% and 4% respectively, were presented by men. However, when being asked, Finnish women claimed that their employers are influenced by gender stereotypes (Podder & Poder, 2015). In a similar vein, 44% of the women employed full-time in Finland reported having encountered gender-based disadvantage in their current work in year 2017. While this number is significant, the corresponding percentage of men was much higher at 75%. In fact, for the time period 1998-2017, more men reported having been disadvantaged by their gender than women with the differences in figures ran from 1.5 times to double at times. Studies like Galy-Badenas &

Croucher's (2016) have also confirmed that Finland still has a dominant masculine organizational culture. Adding to the discussion, Lammi-Taskula (2008), Misra and Strader (2013) pointed to the pay gap between two genders and between mothers and childless men suggesting the existence of motherhood pay penalty in Finland. While the pay gap between childless women's wage and childless men's wage were shrinking and stayed at around 13 percentiles in difference, the mothers' wages are significantly lower at 20 percentiles in difference. Misra and Strader's (2013) study also confirmed the marriage and fatherhood premium in men's wages in Finland. Little has been known regarding the maternal wall topic in Finland though, i.e., whether it exists and if it does, how high it is. As for the support at work, albeit the commonly held belief that Finland has good formal and informal support systems that facilitate mothers' working, little has been formally recorded in the literature concerning this aspect.

To summarize, since Finland has been one of the world's forerunners in gender equality and women's employment, one may expect working mothers here would have to face few obstacles at work due to their gender and mother's status. Yet, prior studies have discovered certain negative experiences of mothers at work in the country. To a large extent, these issues are caused by the unfavorable gender ideologies and relations existing in the society as well as at the workplaces. Having discussed the public side, i.e., paid work, of the mothers' experiences, in the next subsection, I will move on to present the private side of being a working mother as characterized in the literature.

2.2.3. The working mothers' experiences in the private sphere

While the previous subsection discusses the women's experiences in the public sphere of working, this subsection concerns the private sphere of the working mothers' experiences when returning to work after their maternity leaves, e.g., their home life, their self-driven strategies to combine work and home, their thoughts and feelings, etc.

Studies have portrayed the life of a working mother as an extremely busy one filled with different, and often conflict, demands from work and family. On the one hand, like other employees, working mothers are pressured to perform at work and are tied to the work schedule. Furthermore, with the popularity of knowledge-based work and the development of communication technology nowadays, the border between work and family life is blending, especially from the direction of work to home spillovers (Clark, 2000; Tammelin, 2009). Examples of work to home spillovers are: mothers' answering work emails and calls at home, staying up late to do work tasks, etc. On the other hand, mothers also want to have more time to bond with and care for their babies and have to undertake different domestic work. (Moe & Shandy, 2010; Alstveit et al., 2011; Weber & Cissna-Health, 2015) These demands from work and family could drain the mothers, and thus should be managed.

Some strategies used by mothers to better combine and balance their work - family life were identified in the literature. Organizing and prioritizing tasks, i.e., selecting which task to focus first, knowing what to compromise, and employing suitable means to achieve their purposes and, is a crucial strategy and skill for working mothers to combine their work and family life (Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Wiese & Heidemeier, 2012). This also means that these women are not afraid to seek additional help with their work if necessary. For example, Cheung and Halpern (2010) observed that working mothers in managerial positions outsourced some of the work tasks when possible given that they have the decision-making power. In addition, opting for a flexible work arrangement, scaling back on their career, and maintaining the border between work and family are also common strategies used (Tammelin, 2009; Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Young & Scott, 2018). On top of those, sharing the workload at home is another important strategy used by women to lessen the pressure from home demands. Everyday mothers, together with their spouses, have to take care various of practicality issues like taking the children to childcare and picking them up, doing grocery shopping, preparing food, doing laundry, cleaning the house, etc. (Tammelin, 2009). Thus, the negotiation and division of labor in the household regarding paid and unpaid domestic work between the partners can greatly influence the mothers' experiences, i.e., a favorable arrangement can help reducing the demands and pressure from the mothers' private life allowing them to better tend to paid work, and vice versa. Once

again, the issue of gender roles and relations lie in the core of this labor negotiation and division at the household.

While it is becoming more and more acceptable for women to be in paid work, the traditional ideology of gender roles still persists within the household in many countries, i.e., a mother is regarded as the primary homemaker and caregiver in the family. This is also a case for Finland, yet to a lesser degree than other countries like Germany, France, the Netherlands, the US, Australia, etc. (Lammi-Taskula, 2008; Lewis et al., 2008; Käsälä & Oinas, 2015; Salin et al., 2018). This traditional take on gender roles in the private sphere in Finland rooted from the mid-1990's economic recession, during which the unfavorable economic situation took away the jobs of many women and forced them to become stay at home moms (Rantalaiho, 1997; Haataja & Nyberg, 2006) cited by Lammi-Taskula (2008). In other words, many families in this period followed the male breadwinner - female caregiver division of labor model. Although the economic recession passed and women as well as mothers are now active in the labor force again, this traditional division of household labor has left behind its legacy and could be found co-existing with the gender equality thinking and the dual-earner family ideology (i.e., both parents engage in paid work and unpaid work) in Finland. In 2012, 60% of the surveyed people in Finland still supported the traditional gender roles ideology and labor division within a household, while 40% favored the equal gender roles ones (Salin et al., 2018). Parenthood in Finland is still, by large, a synonym for motherhood to mothers, fathers and society's discourses (Perälä-Littunen, 2007; Närvi, 2012). The society's conception of "a good mother" in Finland could be understood as the mother's prioritizing her family over work and always being there for the children (Närvi, 2012). As a result from this gendered ideologies of household labor division and motherhood, mothers in Finland commonly spend more time on childcare and domestic work than fathers (Lammi-Taskula, 2008; Käsälä & Oinas, 2015). To many women, this is regarded as a natural and default arrangement, i.e., needless of negotiation, especially when the spouse has good employment (Närvi, 2012). According to Statistics Finland (2018), in 2017, women spent 43.8 hours per week on unpaid domestic work compared to 26.6 hours per week of men during the period when the child is from 0 to 6 years old. The difference was 17.2 hours per week. Among the domestic work, women spent around 413 minutes per day on childcare took alone while men only spent 254 minutes per day. On the other hand, men worked

more than double the time women did in paid work (37.2 hours per week versus 17.7 hours per week). For the large proportion of women in Finland who go back to full-time paid employment after their maternity leaves, traditional labor division in the household could create a double burden on the mothers as they are required to perform the majority of the domestic unpaid work (England 2010; Salin et al., 2018). Nonetheless, people are believed to be heading towards the equal gender roles ideologies in the private sphere of life nowadays in Finland (Perälä-Littunen, 2007; Närvi, 2012; Neilson & Stanfors, 2013). Consequently, more negotiation regarding domestic tasks between the parents could be expected.

In addition to the pressure from work and home, working mothers also could experience the feeling of guilt when leaving their small children for work or when spending not enough time with them (Tammelin, 2009; Jones, 2012; Borelli et al., 2017), and criticisms from the society (e.g., at work, on social media, etc.) for trying to have a career after having become mothers (Linton, 2019). The above-mentioned persisting “good mother” ideology which requires mothers to intensively care and be there for their children and family is the underlying cause of these negative feeling and experiences. As said, a society’s long-standing ideologies have immense impacts on people’s attitudes and shape their behaviors and actions to conform with the norms in the society (Fagan, 2001; Pfau-Effinger, 2004; Crompton, 2006; Lewis et al., 2008; Gregory, 2011; Salin et al., 2018). The case of the mothers’ going back to work post maternity leaves, i.e., shortly after childbirth, could be interpreted as the mothers are going against the norms, against the ideal motherhood conception ingrained within themselves and hold valid in the broader social context. The mothers’ uneasy feeling and met criticisms are, hence, could be considered as self-imposed and externally-imposed “corrective actions” for their untraditional actions and behaviors.

To sum up, working mothers, including those in Finland, often have to juggle different demands from work and home while experiencing a feeling of guilt and/or facing criticisms for trying to pursue their professional careers after having children. Gender roles ideologies in the society (i.e., men versus women, fathers versus mothers) are central to these experiences of working mothers.

2.3. Conceptual Framework

In the literature review, I have presented the contextual elements of the Finnish society and discussed the working mothers' reality and experiences as portrayed in the broader literature and in Finland specifically. My aim has been to provide an overall picture of the female professionals' experiences when they go back to work after their maternity leaves and to offer some key concepts that influence these experiences. In order to do so, I have developed the following conceptual framework.

As can be seen from the literature review, the mothers' experiences of returning to work are complex ones shaped by the interactions between their work life, family life and the women's private self. These different aspects of the working mothers' experiences and the interactions between them, in turns, cannot happen in a vacuum but are under the influences of the society and organization contexts. Figure 1 below provides an illustration of the conceptual framework this thesis uses to study the mothers' experiences of returning to work post maternity leaves in Finland.

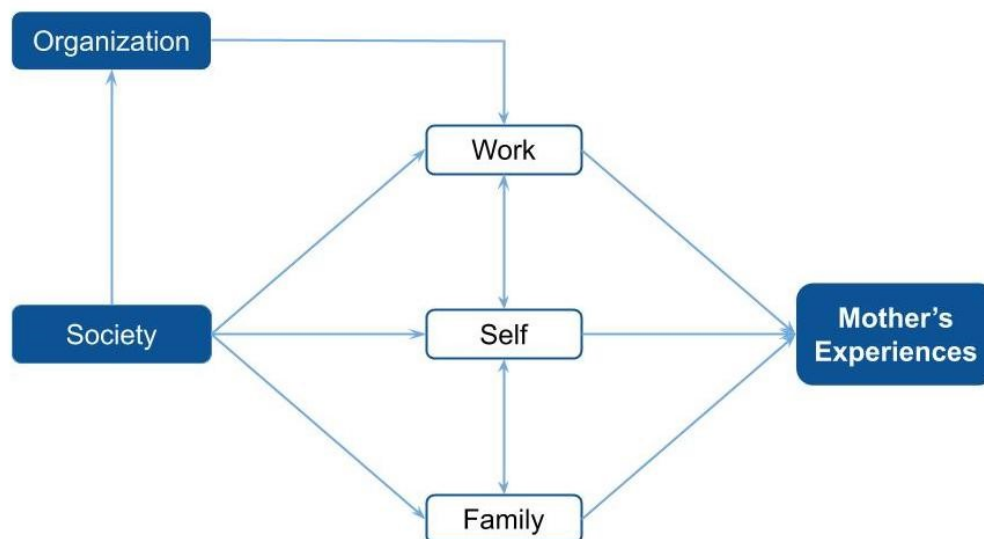


Figure 1: Conceptual framework - Elements shaping a mother's experience of returning to work post maternity leaves

As can be seen from Figure 1, the societal context of a country has an overarching effect on the whole experiences of mothers when they return to paid employment after maternity leaves. Particularly for this study, the roles ideologies and support policies in Finland are in focus. Agreeing with researchers like Fagan (2001), Pfau-Effinger (2004), Crompton (2006), Lewis et al. (2008), Gregory (2011), Salin et al. (2018), I believe that ideologies of gender roles as well as mother's - father's roles held in the Finnish society have great impacts on the working mothers' experiences. A more egalitarian view on these roles ideologies supports mothers' working in paid job because it positively influences how organizations perceive and treat working mothers, how labor division in the household is divided to allow mothers' working, and how working mothers see and manage themselves. Additionally, an egalitarian society also provides more support for working mothers to combine work and family. In this case of Finland, the concerned societal means of support are paid leaves and childcare provision.

On the organizational level, the good employee ideology (together with the broader gender roles and mother's role ideologies), organizational culture and support could directly influence the mothers' experiences at work when they return to work after maternity leaves. As pointed out by literature, the good employee ideology at the workplace is often male-oriented, and thus could contradict to the mother's role ideology. Such a contradiction could result in unfavorable treatments of mothers at work. Besides, the organizational culture and support are also critical in mothers' experiences at work. Having a family-friendly culture where mothers' working is valued and facilitated, the possibility to arrange flexible work, and supportive managers have all been emphasized in the literature to have a mediating effect on the working mothers' overall experiences.

Keeping the larger context of the Finnish society and organizations in mind, this thesis will study the experiences of women when they return to work from maternity leaves from three analysis unit, namely the women's three spheres of life: the work life, family life, and self. Particularly, in each of these spheres, the reality of the women's experiences as well as how they manage their circumstances will be looked at. The interaction between these spheres of life will also be of interest in this thesis.

Using this conceptual framework, the study aims to capture in a holistic manner the experiences of women when they go back to employment after a period of career break due to childbirth and childcare, i.e., their maternity leaves, in Finland, as well as how they manage their new circumstances.

3. DATA AND METHODS

In this chapter, issues regarding methodology choice, methods of data production and analysis, as well as criteria for evaluating the study will be outlined. In specific, the first section will discuss the qualitative methodology as the preferred methodology in studying the thesis' research question. Then, the specific strategies for data production, i.e., interview strategy and sampling strategies, will be presented in the second section. After that, the thematic analysis as the method for data analysis will be covered in the third section. Finally, the last subsection will concern the evaluation criteria for this study.

3.1. The Qualitative Methodology

The qualitative research methodology is chosen for conducting this thesis because it better suits the research question of this study. As can be seen from the *Literature Review* chapter, few studies have looked explicitly into the women's experiences of returning to work post maternity leaves in Finland, e.g., what their reality at work and at home is like, as well as how they feel and manage the situations. Therefore, this thesis seeks to enrich the current literature by answering the research question of: *How do well-educated employed mothers in Finland experience and manage returning to work post maternity leaves?*. Accordingly, the focus of this thesis is on discovering and describing the complex experiences, i.e., thinking, feelings and doings, of the women in regard to their going back to work after their maternity leaves entrenched in the context of Finland. Yet, these thinking, feelings and doings of the women are difficult to be reduced to variables that allow testing and comparison, which are the strengths of the quantitative research method (Creswell, 1998). Furthermore, I argue that when trying to quantify the women's thinking, feelings and doings, the richness of their experiences will inevitably be lost. Therefore, the qualitative research methodology is deemed to be more suitable than the quantitative one for conducting the study. In particular, I am guided by the relational ontology stand which maintains the view that the person and reality are inseparable (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012) and the social constructionism epistemology that understand

reality as being formed via social interaction and knowledge as being subjectively interpreted (Riessman, 1993). All the women's experiences are to be seen as equally valid and thus equally tended to.

In pursuing answers to the set research question, this thesis is conducted as an interview study since talking with the participants about their experiences appears to be the most viable means to collect data for this thesis. Due to the constraints in the research time frame and access to suitable participants, I could not follow or observe in person the women's journey of returning to work in real time but rather study their experiences retrospectively and via their recollection of personal experiences. According to Kvale (2007), an interview is a professional interaction where the researcher carefully questions the participants and actively listens to their answers in order to obtain knowledge. The following subsection of *Data Production* will elaborate on the process.

3.2. Data Production

In this section, the interviewing strategy as well as the sampling strategy used in the study will be respectively presented.

Interviewing strategy

Concerning the interviewing strategy, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to produce data for this thesis. According to Kvale (2007), an in-depth semi-structured interview is one where the interviewer focus on probing the participants' responses, e.g., by asking the participants to give examples or clarify what they mean, etc. with the ultimate purpose of obtaining descriptions of the participants' experiences for interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena. In particular, each participant was interviewed individually for 76 minutes on average about her own experiences of returning to work after maternity leaves, e.g., her thinking, feelings and concerns, doings, etc. This one-on-one interview approach allows for

inquiring deeply into the personal experiences of each participant. Besides, all participants were told that there would be no right and wrong answer but their own experiences at the beginning of the interviews to encouraging their openly sharing of personal experiences. The interviews took place in either coffee shops or the women's workplace according to their preferences and convenience. For each interview, I went into it with an open-mindedness to the experiences to be shared by the women. During each interview, the participant described her experiences while I, the researcher, focused on active listening and probing for more details and clarity, and occasionally asked the questions from the interview guide. Using an interview guideline in a semi-structured interview helps the author with keeping the interviews on track to serve the research question, while at the same time having the flexibility to pursue emerging points of interest.

The interview guide used for this study comprises questions covering: the participant's background information, their experiences of the maternity leave period, the decision to return to work, the work and workplace experiences, the home life experiences, and in that order. The order of the question is chronological and moves from the general and easier to answer questions to the more personal and reflection-required ones. This order of questions is supposed to be natural for the participant to recollect their experiences as well as to help ease them into opening up with the researcher. The questions were created based on the conceptual framework developed for this thesis to holistically examine all aspects of the women's experiences. The interview guide can be seen in full in Appendix 1.

In addition, all the participants were informed beforehand and reminded at the beginning of the interviews of the study's purpose and the estimated duration of the interview; that the interviews are voluntary, would be kept anonymous, recorded and later on verbatim transcribed for analysis. In transcribing the interviews, I also marked down pauses, laughter, significant non-verbal cues, etc. In the end, the eight interview transcripts yielded a total of 236 pages of text (1.5-spaced in Times New Roman font, size 12). At this stage, I also took notes of the interviews while it happened and afterward, e.g., my impression of the interviews, ideas for important themes, etc. During the interview, both the researcher and the participant assumed that their words would be understood as spoken and intended. In general, all the interviews took place in a positive atmosphere and collaborative manner. Some participants were so open in sharing and

reflecting their experiences that they were willing to go over the booked time for their interviews. As a result, I obtained rich descriptions of the women's experiences of returning to work after their maternity leaves, which make high-quality data for the study.

As a summary, Table 2 below outlines the data production process for this thesis.

Interview	Interview location	Interview duration	Transcript - number of pages
Niina	Coffee shop	45 minutes	20
Leia	Office	1 hour 30 minutes	35
Henna	Office	1 hour 2 minutes	31
Erina	Coffee shop	1 hour 32 minutes	34
Emma	Office	1 hour 58 minutes	42
Ella	Coffee shop	52 minutes	19
Saara	Coffee shop	1 hour 25 minutes	33
Anna	Coffee shop	1 hour 4 minutes	22

Table 2: Data production process

Sampling strategy

Adopting the social constructionist stand, data in this study is seen as being actively produced by the participants and researcher, instead of simply being collected. For the data production for this study, I employed the criterion sampling strategy and the snowballing strategy. Criterion sampling refers to choosing participants satisfying certain criteria deemed suitable by the researchers for research quality assurance (Creswell, 1998). In particular, since my research question is *How do well-educated employed mothers in Finland experience and manage*

returning to work post maternity leaves?, I chose to interview women who satisfied the following criteria:

- Have a university degree
- Are married or cohabitating with their husbands/ partners
- Had worked full time in Finland before childbirth and maternity leaves
- Returned back to work in Finland after maternity leaves for a maximum of 2 years

This means that I took in women from different industries and with varying numbers of children. I believe that such criteria could give me a somewhat representative picture of the local context while being focus enough to allow in-depth studying.

In addition to the described criterion sampling strategy, I also used the snowballing sampling strategy. According to Creswell (1998), snowballing sampling means identifying potential participants from current ones or from other people around, i.e., via the people network. This strategy was especially beneficial for this study of mothers' experiences of returning to work post maternity leaves in Finland because one mother usually knows other mothers.

Concerning the sample size, I aimed to recruit 5 to 10 mothers, which is a common sample size for a qualitative study and for a master's thesis. The actual number of participants for this study is 8. Due to my set criteria, I was preparing for having non-native Finnish participants, yet in the end, all the participants are white, native Finnish born and raised. It's important to remark here that while the mother-tongue of the participants is Finnish, they were all made aware upfront that the study would be conducted in English, and thus, a good command of the English language is necessary. Moreover, all the participants were informed at every contact that their participation in the study is voluntary and would be kept anonymous. Table 3 and Table 4 below summarize the background information of the participants.

Participant	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Maternity leaves duration
Niina	32	Married	1	12 months
Leia	42	Married	3	19 months
Henna	42	Married	1	16 months
Erina	30	Married	2	18 months
Emma	29	Married	2	14 months
Ella	41	Married	1	12 months
Saara	38	Cohabitate	1	13 months
Anna	34	Married	1	10 months

Table 3: Participants' demographic information and maternity leaves duration

Participant	Job prior to childbirth & maternity leaves	Job post childbirth & maternity leaves	Time since returning to work
Niina	Sales	Sales	4 months
Leia	Legal consultant	Legal consultant	3 months
Henna	HR manager	HR manager	14 months
Erina	Legal consultant	Legal consultant	7 months
Emma	Planning officer	Program manager	14 months
Ella	HR manager	HR manager	7 months
Saara	Planning officer	Planning officer	20 months
Anna	PhD candidate	PhD candidate	21 months

Table 4: Participants' career-related information

3.3. Data Analysis

In order to make sense from the data, this study adopted the thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a greatly flexible and useful method to look for and analyze themes, i.e., patterns, within the data set for various theoretical positions, including mine of the relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology for this thesis. A *theme* in this thematic analysis refers to “*something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set*” (ibid: 82). The key idea here is how significant and closely linked to the research question a theme is, and not the quantifiable measures like frequency of repetition in the data set. A more repeated theme does not automatically guarantee that it is a good theme for the specific research question at hand. Therefore, in determining the relevance and significance of a theme, the researcher’s own judgement plays a vital role as there is no pre-prescribed “formula” for this.

In conducting a thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006: 87) recommended an iterative process including of 6-step: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

First, the researcher is required to familiarize his- or herself to the data. I have an advantage coming into this step as I conducted all the interviews and manually transcribed the interviews’ recordings myself. This means that I deeply immersed in the data from the very beginning. Additionally, I also closely read and re-read all the transcripts multiple times and kept an analysis journal with me to write down my initial ideas for possible codes that describe what was being said by the participants and alike.

Second, having familiarized with the data set, the researcher could move to the second step of generating initial codes for the thematic analysis. As said, a code is a short description of what was being said in the interview, and not an interpretation. In practice, this means that I kept a fair mind to each data items when reading the transcripts, and manually wrote down a code whenever I encounter some interesting ideas or details. One code could be applied for different

paragraphs or segments in the transcripts, and vice versa, one paragraph or segment could have multiple codes (ibid). In my study, I embraced the data-driven type of coding and analysis, i.e., the codes (and later on the themes) were rooted in the data itself. I first coded an individual transcript, then proceeded to another in a systematic manner, until the whole data set was coded. Then I extract the data for each code, i.e., copy-paste the relevance sentences/ paragraphs/ segments and their immediate surrounding context, and collated the individual code together into a separate file on my laptop. At the end of this step, I had almost 200 codes of various levels.

Third, moving on with the analysis, the researcher now searches for themes from the data. As mentioned, a theme is broader than a code and coming up with a theme requires active interpretation of the codes and the data. In fact, the process could involve the researcher's analyzing their codes, examining their relationship with each other, grouping and sorting them into potential themes (ibid). For this step, I used a lot of post-it notes and stickers to physically visualize and move the codes and themes around, as well as drew a lot of mind-maps depicting the possible relationships between different codes and themes. At the end of this step, I had some initial themes.

Fourth, the researcher will review the potential themes identified at the end of step 3. In this step, I read through all the extracts of the codes again and again to examine if they support the themes or if there was something inconsistent or something I overlooked. A lot of breaking, combing, and getting rid of codes and themes happened in this step. Braun and Clarke (2006) used the term *internal homogeneity* to describe this process of making sure that all the extracts under a theme form a coherent pattern and each theme is distinguishable from the other. Then, the new themes were re-read in relation to the whole data set to check for their representative accuracy and to check for any un-coded data within the themes to achieve what Braun and Clarke (2006) called the *external heterogeneity*. This was a very long and exhausting step where I often needed to start over again. Throughout this step, the research question acted as a North Star for me. This reviewing and refining themes process ended when I could no longer add anything substantial to the analysis, and got a satisfactory thematic map of the data as well as a

good idea of the overall story the themes are telling. By the end of this step, I identified 5 prominent themes: (1) *The Simultaneous Sense Of Sorrow And Joy*, (2) *The Enablers For Mothers' Working In Finland*, (3) *The Time Management*, (4) *The Sense Of Guilt*, and (5) *Work And Home Benefit Each Other*, which will later on be elaborated in the *Findings* chapter. Figure 2 below gives an example of the theme abstraction from the data and codes.

Fifth, the thematic analysis continued with the author's defining and naming each of the refined themes from the previous step. Essentially, I needed to determine what each theme entails as well as its border, and give such theme a name that concisely captures what it is about. Ideally, the themes' names should be attention-grabbing, too. (ibid)

Lastly, having reached this point, the author could start producing the final report of his or her findings. In the final report, it is important to inform the readers of what was done in the research and analysis process as well as to include suitable data extract, i.e., quotes, to provide evidence for each theme. Moreover, a good report does not merely present themes and quotes but also offers convincing analytic reasonings to illustrate the story told by the data, and makes arguments in relation to the research question. (ibid) My report is this thesis itself.

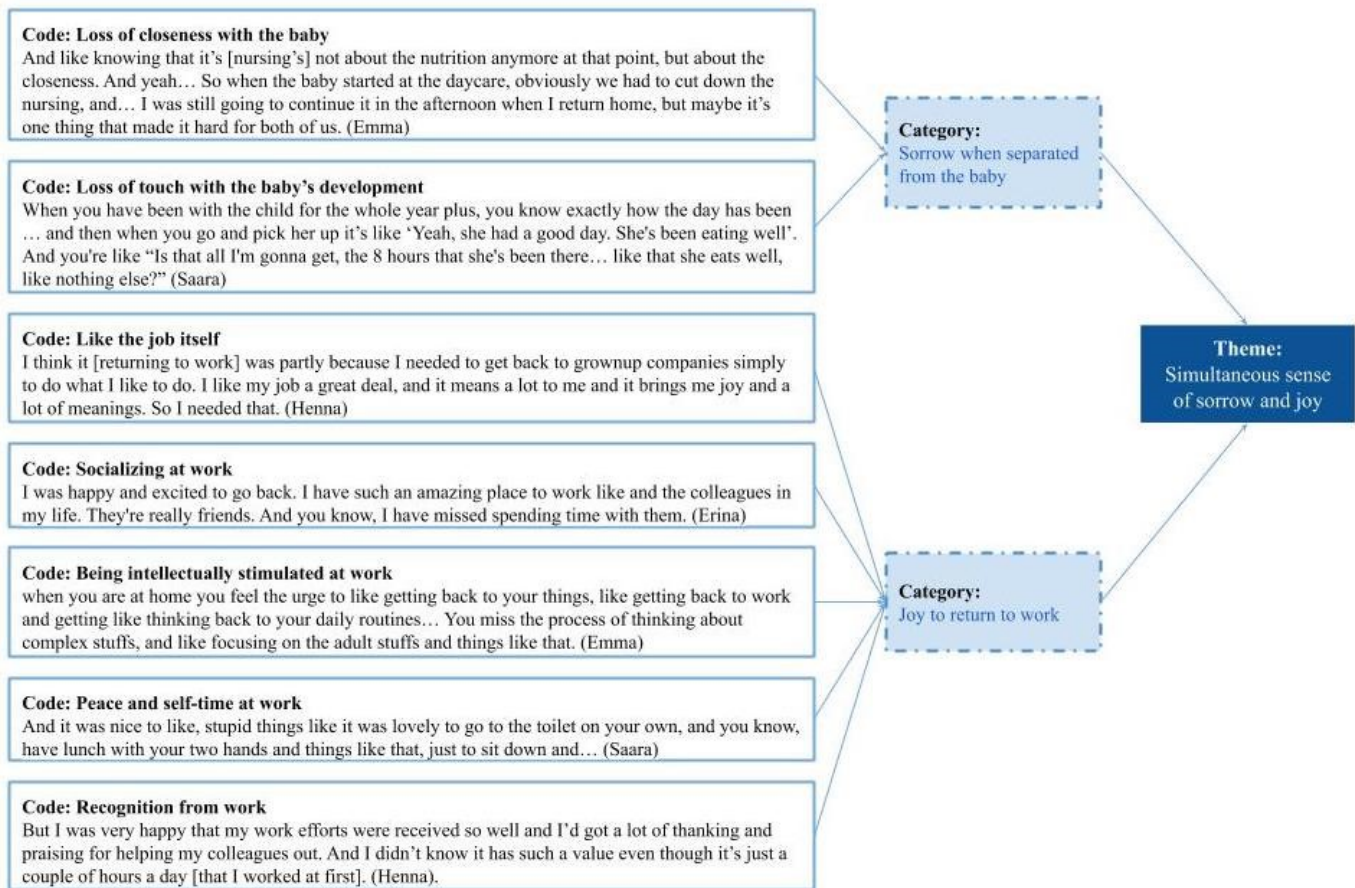


Figure 2: An example of theme abstraction in the thesis

3.4. Research Evaluation

As said, unlike a quantitative study which is commonly designed to accurately measure an object (Kananen, 2011), a qualitative study aims to generate rich descriptions and knowledge that is faithful to human activities. Therefore, traditional criteria for evaluating a quantitative study like reliability and validity are not suitable to be used for assessing the quality of a qualitative study. Instead, qualitative researchers strive to ensure their studies' quality by producing defensible knowledge claims and maintain their awareness in interpreting data. (Sandberg, 2005; Easterby-Smith et al., 2012) In order to evaluate this study, I adopted the concept of *trustworthiness* including four criteria of *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*,

and *confirmability* suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), as well as paying attention to reflexivity and ethical concern of the thesis.

Credibility refers to the fit between the participants' views and experiences and the researcher's representation of them. This means that the participants or readers of the study should be able to recognize the experiences being told and draw satisfactorily similar interpretations as the researcher. In their study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) also set out different means for a researcher to achieve credibility in his or her qualitative study, namely: the researcher's prolonged engagement in field, the researcher's persistent observation of the participants in their natural settings, the use of triangulation, the use of peer debriefing, the analysis of negative or deviant case, the referential adequacy, and the use of member checks. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011; Nowell et al., 2017) Due to the limit in resources for this research, i.e., time, human resource, prolonged access to participants and their natural settings, etc., it was not feasible to take all proposed measures to ensure the study's credibility. However, peer debriefing was conducted. I was fortunate to have chances to discuss, review and contest my interpretations with two neutral fellow students from Aalto University who were unfamiliar with my study. The debriefing helped refine my interpretations. In addition, I had familiarized myself with the research topic by reading various studies and news articles surrounding the phenomenon of women's going back to work (especially after maternity leaves), fathers and paternity leave in Finland, work - life balance, work - life spillover and border, etc. prior to data production and analysis process. Besides, the long and open interview sessions also helped with understanding the participants' personalities, which were useful in interpreting the data.

Transferability refers to the possibility to have the research findings applicable for studies conducted in a similar context, i.e., a case-to-case generalization. Providing a thick description of the research contextual information and boundaries could help fellow researchers in judging the transferability of the study. (ibid) In this thesis, I tried to achieve transferability by paying attention to explaining and describing the context of my study, i.e., the Finnish society and systems, the study boundaries as well as limitations. Besides, the use of criterion sampling could help support the transferability of the study better than a random sampling strategy could.

Dependability refers to the possibility to obtain similar results should the study is to be replicated with a similar sample, using the same methods, in a similar context. So as to meet the dependability criterion, the researcher needs to show the readers that the research process is logical, traceable and documented. (ibid). In this thesis, I tried to do so by paying attention to explaining and describing my research design as well as process, including the data production and data analysis. Nonetheless, the possibility to have another member from the research team to conduct his or her analysis and interpretation process separately for findings comparison as well as the possibility to have experienced or senior researcher(s) examine the research process and interpretations were not available for this thesis.

Confirmability refers to the researcher's findings and interpretations being firmly rooted in the data. The researcher could reach confirmability by ensuring the above three criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability as well as by providing evidence for linking the data with his or her interpretations. (ibid) Throughout the *Findings* chapter of this thesis, evidence, i.e., quotes, for my interpretations was presented.

Additionally, since I took the social constructivist stand in this study, I believe it is crucial to include reflexivity as an evaluation criterion for the thesis. According to Bold (2012), reflexivity refers to the researcher' being aware of their subjectivity and continuously reflect on how their subjectivity could influence the research process throughout the study. In order to meet this criterion, I practiced my reflexivity for this thesis by outlining my pre-understandings and assumptions about the mothers' returning to work experiences, especially in the context of Finland, at the beginning of the research process, as well as keeping a research journal in which my impressions and thoughts in producing and analyzing the data were documented.

Finally, I took the ethical criterion seriously with this study. In particular, I always informed and reminded the participants of the voluntary nature of the study and how the data would be collected and treated, as well as took measures to ensure the absolute anonymity for the participants, e.g., using pseudonyms and removing all identifiable information of them from the transcripts, the extracts, and the final paper.

4. FINDINGS

Having reviewed the existing literature and outlined the research method used in the thesis, this part of the paper will present the findings surrounding the mothers' experiences of going back to work post maternity leaves in Finland. First, it was observed that the mothers were generally happy to return to work after their maternity leaves despite facing certain challenges. Second, three enablers that facilitate the women's return and mothers' working were detected. Third, the women encountered a lack of time being working mothers and thus sought to manage the freshly emerged situation. Fourth, much as the women were happy to go back to work, they also experienced a sense of guilt towards their work and towards their babies. Finally, the women found that work and home could benefit each other. Such findings are under the five themes of the women's experiences identified in the data analysis, namely: (1) *The Simultaneous Sense Of Sorrow And Joy*, (2) *The Enablers For Mothers' Working In Finland*, (3) *The Time Management*, (4) *The Sense Of Guilt*, and (5) *Work And Home Benefit Each Other*. The following sections will elaborate on the themes respectively.

4.1. The Simultaneous Sense Of Sorrow And Joy

Upon returning to work post maternity leaves, the participants experienced a mixed emotion. On the one hand, they found it difficult to separate from the babies, i.e., the sorrow. On the other hand, they were happy to go back to work, i.e., the joy.

As for the sense of sorrow, leaving the babies behind when returning to work was found to be especially challenging for the women. Since the women always stayed with and cared for the babies during their maternity leaves, the bond between the mother and her child grew so strong during such time. When this bond was suddenly broken as the women returned to work, they suffered emotionally. Talking about their struggles, women often described a loss of closeness and touch with the babies' life.

When you have been with the child for the whole year plus, you know exactly how the day has been like, everything, how they've been eating, sleeping, but also everything like, "Oh, she hasn't done that before. Now she knows how to do that and oh...". You know, you pick up everything, and then when you go and pick her up it's like "Yeah, she had a good day. She's been eating well". And you're like "Is that all I'm gonna get, the 8 hours that she's been there... like that she eats well?", like nothing else like... And it was really difficult to sort of like, kind of give that up, that I don't actually know any more now what exactly is involved in her day when she's there. And and that was... I hadn't been prepared for that. (Saara)

The fact that the babies usually cried when the mothers left made it worse for the women, too.

Despite the struggles when parting from their babies, all participants said that they were happy to return to work and wanted to have both career and family.

It wasn't even that career-related that I felt, you know, that in order to save my career I need to go back to work really quickly. It was more that I just need to go back to work to be happy in some sense. (Niina)

Work makes the women happy in different ways. First, work could be seen as a source of self-fulfillment for the participants. The participants love their work and get satisfaction purely from doing it. For example, Ella and Anna talked about their joy of working as follows:

And it's nice to be back in business, since I love the job and love the people, and enjoy it there. So, I didn't feel any hardness or stuffs like that even though there are a lot of work to do. (Ella)

I was really excited about what I was doing, I enjoyed it, and then and then I had kind of a connection to work life and something intellectual to do. (Anna)

In addition, work also provides the women with socializing opportunities, intellectual stimuli, as well as some alone time and peace, all of which were largely missing from the women's life for over a year during their maternity leaves. According to the participants, even though they tremendously enjoyed being with their babies during the maternity leaves, they often felt isolated, especially from the adult world, i.e., lack of interactions with other adults and lack of non-baby-related conversations. In fact, the women's days during their maternity leaves were filled with various childcare and "mundane" housework tasks. While these domestic work took up a large portion of the women's time and energy every day leaving them little to no time for themselves (especially if the husbands/ partners were too busy working to help out with the domestic work), the repetitive and no-brainer nature of the domestic work tasks bored the women. Hence, the women urged to return to work to meet these needs of theirs. The greater the contrast between giving most of the said elements of socializing, intellectual work and self-time up during their maternity leaves and having them again at work after returning is, the happier the women would feel.

It was pretty clear to me that I wanted to go to work, like, not staying at home for more years. And I was actually missing the social aspect of, you know, kind of a balance that everything isn't just at home and with the children... I was happy and excited to go back. I have such an amazing place to work... And the colleagues in my life, they're really friends. And you know, I have missed spending time with them... Talking and also, you know, actually doing something with my brain. (Erina)

And it was nice to like, stupid things like it was lovely to go to the toilet on your own, and you know, have lunch with your two hands and things like that, just to sit down and... (Saara)

As can be seen, this self-fulfillment joy was acting as an intrinsic motivation for the women to return to work.

Second, unlike domestic work, paid work also makes the women happy as it recognizes their efforts, e.g., in the forms of pay or praise from colleagues. For instance, one participant expressed her thrill when her colleagues thanked her for the work she did after she returned as quoted below:

But I was very happy that my work efforts were received so well and I'd got a lot of thanking and praising for helping my colleagues out. And I didn't know it has such a value even though it's just a couple of hours a day [that I worked at first]. (P3)

This recognition from the workplace could be considered as an extrinsic motivation for the women's getting back to work after their maternity leaves.

4.2. The Enablers For Mothers' Working In Finland

The data analysis reveals three important enablers for the mothers' working in Finland on the three levels of society, work organization and home. Respectively, the three enablers are: the childcare arrangement, the organization's support, and the husbands'/ partners' support. These three enablers make up the second theme of *The Enablers For Mothers' Working In Finland*, and will be further discussed below.

4.2.1. The childcare arrangement

During the interview and data analysis, the women's concern for childcare arrangement for their babies when going back to work came up prominently. The women only decided to return to

work once they had had their childcare needs sorted out, be it a municipal daycare or a private one. As a matter of fact, some participants stated that a good daycare system was the most important factor supporting their returning to work. The below quote from Emma perfectly illustrates the relevance of childcare arrangement in a mother's returning to work after her maternity leaves.

And given that [the baby] was already like 1 year at the time I got the [job] offer and I had to respond really quickly. And the only thing that would have prevented me from responding was if we were not able to get the daycare for the kids. (Emma)

Even though childcare is universal in Finland, securing a place for the babies in a suitable municipal daycare facility is found to be relatively difficult in the Greater Helsinki area, where 7 out of 8 of the participants live, due to the high demand. Therefore, the families had to settle with what they could get, i.e., a farther-away municipal daycare, or use a private one. Accepting a farther-away daycare place poses challenges for the women and their families as it prolongs their commute time and cut into the time for work and/or for home and for the women's self-time. Besides, the long commute time also makes the women and possibly their babies more tired afterward, as Henna pointed out. Regarding the private daycare, even though they are less crowded than the municipal ones, they still have their issues, e.g., queueing time, being more expensive, requiring the parents to prepare the babies' meals, etc., depending on which type of daycare arrangement it is.

And also I was concerned about how well our child would get used to the daycare when he started in August but it went surprisingly well. But there was another concern, and it's still the biggest. We've got a daycare place very far away from our home, and very far away from our workplaces. So, we get to spend maybe an hour extra every day when we take our son to the daycare and when we get him back home... And it hasn't worked

out very well. I mean we are quite tired of this constant travelling and all that. (Henna)

Moreover, the far-away childcare facility could influence how the women's returning to work. Since the commuting between the childcare and work and between the childcare and home would take a considerable amount of time, the women could be forced to undertake part-time work arrangements against their wishes to work full-time. This was the case with one of the participants, Henna. She expressed the frustration with the current situation and the eager to return to working full-time in several months after her baby has transferred to a more conveniently-located daycare facility.

I feel a little bit frustrated that I can't work full-time, and I can't deliver more, and I can't really show what I can at the moment. But I have to see it as a phase, as a stage that hopefully ends in August next year [when the child will move to the new daycare]. And then I can return to my full potential at work. (Henna)

As demonstrated, the possibility to secure a good childcare arrangement is one of the first conditions to be satisfied for the women to go back to work after their maternity leaves.

4.2.2. The organizations' support

Regarding the organizations' support, while there was no formal support from the workplace exclusively reserved for the women or working mothers, there was no apparent discrimination against the participants when they returned to work post maternity leaves either. Even though some women raised the issue of discrimination against mothers during recruitment, all of them claimed to be treated the same way they had been treated prior to their childbirth and maternity leaves and enjoyed the same treatments as their male and unmarried female colleagues. In most cases, the managers and colleagues were understanding of the women's situations of having a

small baby and supported them either practically with the work-related and home-related issues or supported them mentally.

The managers and colleagues of the participants helped them in different manners. For example, when one participant was having problems getting clients after she returned to work, people at work were trying to help her get more clients and work. Particularly, her manager was handing over his clients to the woman and the colleagues were constantly asking if she was doing fine and if she needed more work. Additionally, getting a day off from work due to the baby's being sick or leaving work early to pick up the baby from the daycare were reported to be easy by all of the women. In general, the managers of the participants were flexible and supportive in terms of the women's working hours and working remotely when needed. Furthermore, the women's managers and colleagues also provided them with mental support during their returning to work. This mental support could be in the forms of people's welcoming and being happy with the women's return, the understanding and the positive atmosphere at the workplace, and/or the lack of negativity towards the women's new situations, as well as the socializing and sharing of experiences between the people at work and the women.

However, the women did not always receive such a high level of support from the workplace. For instance, for one participant, as her working environment was strictly business-only, the level of mental support she received after coming back to work was low. Yet, the participant had no problem arranging her work if needed, e.g., the child's getting sick. Besides, another case of interest was also found in another participant's story when she recollected her experiences of returning to work after the previous maternity leave. Back then, she had not had as positive an experience as she did this time. In specific, she had difficulties both in terms of the work itself and in terms of the mental support. She believed that since her manager and colleagues back then were not parents, they did not truly understand her situation and thus did not support her.

All in all, it seems that the women did not encounter visible discrimination against their mother status at the workplace after their return. Instead, people at work treated the participants as equal

employees as others, which signal an egalitarian gender role ideology at work. In general, the women enjoyed the same favorable formal policies applicable for all employees at the workplace, namely: part-time work, shorter workday, flexible working hour, remote work, and leave-entitlement. In fact, this could be regarded as a standard organizational practice in these organizations. Meanwhile, the mental support from the managers and colleagues, i.e., the informal support from the workplace, is not guaranteed. It is observed that the organization's culture and whether the women's managers and colleagues were parents at the time could significantly influence the level of informal support from the workplace for the women and essentially the women's experience when returning to work after their maternity leaves.

Regarding the organizational culture, it is noted that the women had a more positive and smoother experience going back to work if their organizations promote family-friendly ideas in specific and well-being in general. One participant, Erina, concisely articulated this point as follows: *"The organization culture affects how your colleagues act. And I think how your colleagues welcome you when you come back, I think that's the most important thing."* Besides, having a family-friendly organizational culture helped the women feel easier, for instance, when they needed to have a flexible working arrangement to combine work and family. Nevertheless, the organizational culture alone is not enough but also a woman's familiarity with it counts as it could influence how she interprets incidents at work. Erina also gave an example of this situation.

Well, there's one incident... one of my colleagues who had to take a day off due to her kid being sick. And she wasn't sure if she was expected to work that day, from home... One day [before] she wrote that she was going to be at home with a sick child, and she was going to participate in the meeting and work whenever possible, or something like that. And she had gotten responses "Okay, okay, I hope your child gets better soon", and, you know, whatever. And then another time, she had sent an email just like "I'm at home with a sick child", and you know, "I won't be able to work" and she hadn't gotten any responses. So she had kind

of, you know, interpreted like “Oh, no, now that I’ve...” you know... My colleague had interpreted it that you should be working. And she had a 2-year-old who was sick, and she couldn’t work... We spoke a lot... And so then she had discussed it with her boss, and you know it was, it was all fine. But somehow, she’s still thought that some people in the team expected her to work. I don’t know if they do, I find it very... Well, I find it unlikely... Maybe because I have been in the company for so long, I interpret that things shouldn’t be that way. (Erina)

Likewise, whether the managers and colleagues of the women were parents at the time of their returning to work could affect the women’s experiences. In most instances when the participants received support from their managers and/or colleagues at work, it could be traced back that their managers and colleagues were parents, too. Being parents themselves means that the managers and colleagues have gone through the similar situations as the participants. This helps them understand the participants’ situations better, empathize with the women’s situations and support them more. Additionally, the women also told that they felt better at ease when they needed to be absent from work due to, for example the child being sick, knowing that they were not doing something unusual there because their managers and colleagues did the same, and vice versa, as Saara pointed out:

In our team there wasn’t anyone who had small children. So, I think that was also... that I was completely on my own in that current life situation within the... Now there are more people with small children. But when I came back, I was the only one who had a toddler. So, I think that was as well, I felt like I was the only one who was away because her child was ill. (Saara)

On top of the support from their managers and colleagues, the participants’ experiences of returning to work were also influenced by the degree of change at the workplace after their maternity leaves in comparison to how it had been previously. When there had been no

significant changes at work, the participants found that they adapted back to the workplace faster and easier. On the contrary, when there had been great changes, especially in terms of personnel, the participants described their being lost, overwhelmed, and challenged. It took significantly longer for these women to get used to the workplace again and perform in these cases. The underlying reasons for the difficulties that the participants met with in such cases seem to be three-fold. First, the issues stemmed from the mismatch between their expectation and the reality of the workplace when they returned. The participants expected to return to their old territory where they know exactly how everything was, to “*come home*” where it is comfortable. Thus, they were under-prepared for all the newness at the workplace, which caused them not knowing everything anymore, and hence the disorientation and overwhelmed feeling. Second, to make the matter worse, people at work tended to not recognize the women’s issues but instead assumed and expected that they know everything and could perform well. As a result, the women were often left alone trying to figure things out. Finally, with the changes in personnel, the women lost their support groups at work who they socialized with and relied on before going on their maternity leaves, as with the case of Saara. Saara shared that she felt like an outsider at work when she first returned, and it took her a significant period of time and effort to “*find my place*” with the new people and at the workplace again. During this time, none of her colleagues noticed her struggles. Saara attributed this to the private and introvert nature of Finns, i.e., “*People just assumed that I wanted to stay on my own, which wasn't, which wasn't the case.*”. These issues faced by the participants when there had been great changes at the workplace during their maternity leaves were similar to those encountered by expatriates who return to their old countries after a long time.

And when I came back [to work], it was the sort of similar, I don't know... But I felt the same experience that you kind of like when I moved back to Finland [from 6 years living abroad], and also when I came back to work, that you sort of think that you're coming to the same place but you're not actually. (Saara)

In cases when there had been great changes at the workplace or when the women were coming into a new firm, an induction week back to work was believed to be helpful by the participants, i.e., two women said so from their own experiences while another wished that she had had an induction when she came back. An induction to work helped the participants with redirecting their mind towards work after over a year being out of it, as well as in giving the women time to catch up with the changes, make new friends and find their support groups at work.

The inductions we had, I participated in all the inductions that the new people were in... I think that's really good... like getting oriented towards work, and also some of the things that had changed... That I actually got some new information as well. And it was great to also get to meet the new people. So yeah, I think that was very good. (Erina)

On the whole, it can be seen that the participants, on a fundamental level, enjoy an egalitarian organization practice, i.e., equal treating towards all employees and favorable formal policies regarding flexible working arrangement and leave-entitlement. Nonetheless, the informal support, i.e., the managers and colleagues' understanding and mental supporting, is highly dependent on the organizations' context, i.e., the organizational culture and the women's degree of familiarity with such culture, whether the managers and colleagues are parents, the extent of changes that took place at the workplace during the women's maternity leaves.

4.2.3. The husband's/ partner's support

Similarly to the childcare arrangement, the husband's/ partner's support also plays a vital role in the women's experiences of returning to work post maternity leaves in Finland. In fact, the participants shared that their husbands/ partners supported their decision to go back to work after the maternity leaves and assisted them both on the tangible level like sharing the domestic work as well as taking care of the babies, and on the psychological level like offering different kinds of mental support.

First, although their levels of involvement in domestic work vary, the husbands/ partners all participate in childcare tasks and housework. In particular, the majority of the participants' husbands/ partners took paternity leaves and/or parental leaves to look after the babies when the mothers had returned to work, and stayed/ will stay with the babies until he/she went/ goes to daycare. During this time, they were/ are in charge of the housework, too.

So, I returned back to work when our kid was about 10 months. And then my husband stayed home for 6 weeks. And then she [the daughter] started daycare in January... He did all the housework [during this time] as I did for 10 months before that, or most of it. Of course, I did also part of it when I was at home. (Niina)

[My husband]'s on his paternity leave till the end of May. It was 3 months. So... um... My husband said that he wants to be at home even though it was not necessarily easy for him to get the leave. But he wants it, and he was very persistent. So, so, he got it. (Leia)

Then, when the babies started daycare, the husbands/ partners usually take the babies to the daycare in the morning, play with them after work and/or during the weekends, and sometimes care for the babies when they are sick. Additionally, the husbands/ partners also do various housework like cleaning, going grocery shopping, cooking, repairing, etc. The division of the housework tasks between the women and their husbands/ partners is largely based on the personalities and preferences of each parent, as Leia put it:

My husband is very tidy, so he takes care of most of the cleaning... I do the laundry. I like it. I don't let him touch the clothes. He mixes the colors (laugh)... I like to do the dishwashing because I think my husband does not clean properly (laugh). Um... My husband does most of the cooking. So, it comes quite naturally because he's more inventive in the kitchen...

So, it's been pretty easy because he's used to doing a lot at home. My husband does most of the grocery shopping. (Leia)

The role of the husbands'/ partners' participating in domestic work is further highlighted when a woman recollected the difficulties she encountered when her husband got an injury and could not help her with the domestic work anymore during his recovery time.

3 months after I went back to work back then, my husband broke his leg. So for 3 months, I was alone responsible for, first of all I had my job. Well, I was working 4 days a week, so I was working part-time that time, which was a bit challenging in that job. But I had my job, and I had my kids. Because my husband wasn't able to do anything for like 3 months... So... Yeah... So, I have to say that, yeah... That time was so stressful that I don't even remember. Because... It was just so overwhelming. Really. (Leia)

Much as the husbands/ partners are doing at home, in most cases, the women still play a crucial role in overseeing and managing the work in the household. In particular, the women are in responsible for from setting the ground for domestic work, creating a routine at home, to managing and synchronizing everybody's schedule, as well as guiding the participation of the husbands/ partners.

Overall, 3 of the participants said that they were having an equal labor division in terms of domestic work with their husbands/ partners, while 1 participant clearly portrayed her husband/ partner as the one who was doing more at home. This, interestingly, totals to half of the women interviewed.

Nonetheless, it is revealed that the husbands/ partners are not necessarily always so active at home. Rather, it is the paternity leave (and by extension the parental leave) that the husbands/ partners took that acted as a turning point in their attitudes and behaviors towards domestic

work. In essence, by being at home and doing most of the domestic work during the leave, the husbands/ partners could be thought of as having gained a new understanding of the daily life at home, i.e., how much work there is, and appreciation towards the women's efforts. Hence, they would be more likely to share the workload at home with their wives/ partners.

In the beginning he [the husband] worked quite a lot, and he also wanted to exercise, so I had to do most of the things at home. But then, we discussed about it. And after he stayed at home for 6 weeks. He understood that it was actually quite tough also being at home. So I think after those 6 weeks, the balance has been very good because he understands it very well now what it's like to be at home with the baby. I think he's been participating pretty well, so there's no problem with that. But I think it needed some discussions in the beginning. Because the situation was of course quite different for him, that he wasn't at home, so he didn't know what it was to be at home with the baby. (Niina)

In fact, such potential impact of the paternity leave (and the parental leave taken by the husbands/ partners) is recognized by the women, too.

[Currently] I think I do so much at home when he isn't there that he doesn't realize... I think the only way for him to understand 100% is to stay at home himself a while and take care of the kids, like just him, and I work a lot... If and when we have a third child, we've already decided that the priority is that he stays at home with the children... And I think it's an important experience for him, and for the children, and for me as well that he goes through it. So then he learns to appreciate how much work there is at home. (Erina)

Second, the husbands/ partners provided the women with valuable mental support whenever the women met challenges during their returning to work. The mental support could be in the form

of an understanding that the women needed to return to work to be happy. Having the same need to work themselves, all the husbands/ partners of the participants did well this in aspect. Similarly, the mental support could also be in the form of the husbands'/ partners' holding no expectation of the women having to do everything at home. Besides, the husbands/ partners also supported the women by talking and discussing with the women about their concerns and feelings regarding work or life.

I think I would still say that was my husband, that being able to speak to him about my concerns and feelings and knowing that I have his back and that he's on my side, I think that's the most important factor, and also my main support. (Saara)

In sum, the husband's/ partner's support in terms of sharing the domestic workload and offering emotional and mental support as depicted is an important enabler for women to return to work after maternity leaves. In specific, the more equal household labor division and the more mental support the women have, the smoother experience they will have when returning to work. Although some husbands/ partners support their wives/ partners more than others with the domestic work, all of the husbands/ partners of the participants strongly support their wives/ partners mentally.

4.3. The Time Management

This third theme of *The Time Management* encapsulated the women's struggles with not having enough time for their work, home and themselves as well as the strategies they adopted to manage the situations.

Throughout all the participants' experiences, the lack of time issue was strongly emphasized. Particularly, the interviewed women lack time for work, for home and for themselves. As a consequence, they largely use their time for work and home while sacrificing their own self-

time. This new time usage pattern reflects the changes in the women's perspective and values once they became mothers. In specific, the children and family come first for the women, then work makes it to the second position, and the women's selves stand at a lower position in their value systems.

A clearly [sic.] perspective is that my family is number 1. So I'd never want to back to a job where I need to work weekends regularly. I'd never want to go to a job where I'm so much absent that my kids have to suffer. So basically... yeah. I think it's a clear priority... it's the family. On the other hand, I'm also ambitious in my career, so I think it's a good second.
(Leia)

How the women use their time changed significantly for the women once they had become mothers. All the participants pointed out that they no longer have the flexibility to work into the late evening nowadays as they did before because they need to pick the babies up from the daycares, whose closing time is strict, or need and want to get home to their babies. For most of the participants, they need to leave work anywhere from 3 PM to 4 PM to arrive at the daycares on time. After picking up the babies, the women then reserve the several following hours for being with their babies until the babies have fallen asleep. If possible, the women may squeeze some housework like cleaning in during this time. After the babies are asleep, the participants either do the housework, spend time with their husbands/ partners or do their work if necessary. Normally there is a lot of housework to do. The participants would only have some time for themselves once all the other work is done. But usually, they just go to sleep instead of spending time on their hobbies or alike.

Facing this new constraint in time for work and home while wanting to deliver in both areas, i.e., the participants rank work and family high on their value systems and want to have them both, the women seek to manage the new situations. In doing so, the participants try to either make more time for work and home or increase their efficiency at the both fronts.

In an effort to make more time, the women are employing three types of strategies. First, the women are working outside of the normal office working hours. Specifically, the participants who need to leave work early to pick up the babies go to work one or two hours earlier in the morning to guarantee the full-time work, and all of them work late in the evening after the babies have gone to sleep if needed. However, the participants all consciously avoid working at home and working late at night, i.e., to consciously separate work and home. This strategy of working outside of the normal office working hours is made possible thanks to the flexible work arrangements given to the participants from their workplace, i.e., the organizational support, and the help of their husbands/ partners with the domestic work, e.g., staying on paid leaves to care for the babies or taking the babies to the daycare in the morning. Second, the women socialize less at work and after work than they did before childbirth and maternity leaves to have the most time for work and home.

I don't have the time to chit chat with my colleagues as much. (Leia)

I wasn't that eager for participating any non-mandatory evening events (laugh), or if there were some, you know, trainings, well there are not many trainings but like external events that could maybe benefit my work or so... So, I was pretty strict with schedule that I will be at work by 9 and I will leave at 4. And I'm not willing to expand my days very much further. I'd rather work in the evening when the girls are asleep. But like the time that I'm at the office plus the commuting time, I was very strict about that. (Emma)

Finally, some participants are using commercial services for domestic work so as to have more time with their family. For example, Niina and Anna are having cleaners for their houses, and Henna and Saara are using online grocery shopping and home delivery services. Henna also said that she hired a nanny to look after her baby when she needed to go to the office and had nobody else to help her with the baby. She is also open to the idea of hiring a cleaner in the future if it is necessary.

Adding to the making more time for work and home, participants also try to increase their efficiency at both the work and home spheres. Talking about this strategy, the women often emphasized the role of focusing, prioritizing and compromising at work and home. Take the following quotes of Anna, Ella and Saara for examples.

It [the time constraint] forces me to prioritize more. Because I didn't have that amount of time that I used to have... 'Cause I have the tendency to work a lot. And that doesn't mean that if you work a lot, it's all for good use... I know that I need to leave at a certain point. So then I know that I have to focus very strictly on something to get it done by that time. And then I don't have the excess time to polish it to the end of the world.
(Anna)

And I was doing this kind of prioritizing, deciding what are the important ones and I did long day for those which I decided that had to be done first. And still there are some small stuffs which I haven't got enough time to do. (Ella)

And also just lowering standards that I would love my home to be spotless. But sometimes it's just, for me, it's more important to rest or to play with my daughter than to clean, you know. (Saara)

It is worth remarking that when the participants make compromises at work, it does not make them bad employees. But instead, they are concentrating on what is genuinely important, doing what the organizations are paying them to do, and realizing their true values as employees. Moreover, the women also carry out a lot of planning and executing at work and at home, do domestic work in advance, as well as routinize the daily life. The helps from the women's husbands/ partners and possible from other family members further assist them in the home life.

Connecting to this theme of time management is the incidence of the babies' getting sick, which normally happens when they go to the daycares. When the babies get sick, they could not attend the daycares, so the mothers often stay home to care for them. All the participants stressed that this was a big problem for them. Since it was sudden that the babies got sick, it caused abrupt changes in the women's tightly-controlled-schedule and affected their work, i.e., having to re-arrange with the clients or standing the risk of work build-up. It is worth noting that; however, from their sides, the clients and organizations were always fine with the incident and changes in time.

4.4. The Sense Of Guilt

The fourth theme of *The Sense Of Guilt* refers to the guilt the women have towards work and towards the babies identified during the interviews and the data analysis. Yet, the guilt the women had towards their babies appear more prominent than the guilt they had towards work. The following subsections will further discuss these two types of guilt respectively.

Regarding the first type of guilt, those towards paid work, the participants did not always experience such guilt, but when they did, it had to do with their being away from work. In specific, one single participant explicitly expressed her feeling guilty when she was absent from work to take care of her sick baby. As a result, she tried to work from home when the baby was napping and in the late evening. Other times, the guilt towards work was only found in "extreme" cases. For example, the women felt as if they were a burden for the company or a bad employee having taken "*too long*" maternity leaves (more than 3 years the earlier time) or having gone on maternity leaves "*too often*" (2 maternity leaves in about 4 years), according to the participants. In such "extreme" cases, not only that the women had the guilt themselves but also received some jokes and/or remarks from their colleagues, which made it worse for the women although the colleagues did not necessarily mean bad. The experience of Leia is an example of this.

And I also have a very bad conscience for being off work such a long time. I got some remarks from from colleagues. They... made a bit jokes, or they wanted it to be funny. But but I'm not sure if it was only for fun, so yeah... "You have made the record of how long one can be absent from this firm"... They were like just... I think they were joking. But when you were actually absent, it doesn't really feel like a joke (laugh). (Leia)

In order to fight off the guilt towards work, reasoning the situation out seems to help. It helped when a participant reasoned with herself that she could not control what happened and that her happiness matters too and not just the organization's interests. Additionally, the women could also benefit when consulting another who was in a similar situation since stating the reasonings out loud is found to be helpful with one's self-acceptance.

Concerning the latter type of guilt, those towards the babies; however, most participants admitted having had them. First, the women felt a sense of guilt when leaving the babies to return to work. This stemmed from the women's thinking that the babies were so small still then and from the fact that the babies often cried when the women were leaving them. For one participant especially who returned to work when the baby was ten months old, which is relatively early, her guilty feeling was amplified when other people kept asking her of how her baby was doing and managing. Yet, similarly to the above "extreme" cases and the women's guilt towards work, the people who commented did not necessarily mean to criticize the participant in particular.

Well, they comment on "How's your daughter doing? How does she manage?". I say "She's with her father who is an equal to me" (laugh). But... People have very, it's a very heated subject and people have very strong views about the timing... It's not about necessarily colleagues at work. Just outside people... in general... But maybe I think it just that you're easily interpret people's normal discussion or you interpret messages into those discussions that are not necessarily there. Because

or at least I did because myself I was thinking that “Is this... Am I doing the right thing?” (Anna)

Second, the women also experienced a sense of guilt when their work and home time conflicted. For example, Leia felt the guilt when she picked up the baby from the daycare later than others or when she missed her baby's concert because she could not make it back in time from her business trip abroad. Finally, one participant was feeling guilty as her baby got sick from the daycare.

So they both faced this new amount of bacteria in the daycare, so they were sick a lot... And I was also feeling guilty about that, that I'm sort of exposing my children, especially the younger one, to all these sicknesses [sic] that she had to carry. (Emma)

When experiencing a sense of guilt towards their babies, the participants reasoned with themselves and/or talked with their families and friends about the situations. Doing so helped reassure the women that their babies were in a good hand at the daycares and that what the women were doing was normal and necessary for the babies' sake. In fact, the daycares' quality in Finland and necessity are positively perceived by all the participants.

My mom was suggesting that it is actually a very safe option to get the kids to the municipal daycare at a specific age because they follow this sort of like teaching plan. And in the municipal daycare, they must guarantee that the ratio for the caretakers and the kids is like... within the agreed, like it's defined in the law. And given that the kids sleep and during the day like take a nap, and the activities is planned that it is not like the worst-case scenario for your kid. Like it is very safe instead of emotional burden basically. But it is like the environment will be very good for the kids. (Emma)

But I think it's also because she's the only child and we wanted to, for her to have kind of peer support, to be with other children in sort of like a good environment and learn new things... It was amazing how the first year it's sort of looking after the baby, but soon after she turned 1, you could see that her needs completely changed and she was being more social. And... So I do feel that even though the decision was made earlier, it was the right one also for her, that she really enjoyed the day care. She's really a social child. (Saara)

As can be seen from the above discussion about their sense of guilt, it seems that a large part of the guilt experienced by the women had to do with the time dimension, i.e., being away from work, work and family time conflict. Besides, the fact that the women felt guilty and concerned about work build-up when taking a day off, e.g., due to the child's being sick, could indicate the internalized expectation that a good employee should be available for work and at work, as well as deliver in their tasks. On the other hand, the women's guilt towards their babies seems to also stem from the contradiction between their perception of a good mother and their real-life situations. To the participants, a good mother should be present physically and mentally, support and take care of their babies. Henna talked about what she thinks a good mother should be as the following:

I think it's [being a good mother is] to be there for him [the son], to listen to whatever he wants to say, and be interested in what a 2 years old does, and always to be present, not to be absent, not to read your emails or take any professional calls if you don't have to, and... Yeah, just be there for him... I think that's the most important thing, give him security and support him, and show interest, and be positive and supportive, and all that. Even though if you would have had a frustrating day or bad day at work, you don't bring it home, you just put on a smile. (Henna)

4.5. Work And Home Benefit Each Other

The final theme discovered when interviewing the women and analyzing transcripts is *Work And Home Benefit Each Other*. As the name suggests, this theme refers to the fact that the women found that work and home benefit each other instead of merely conflicting with each other.

As shared by the participants, their work life benefits their home life in the sense that being at work all day makes them appreciate the time they have at home with the babies after work more. As a result, they would also be more mentally present when spending time with their babies and enjoy the time better. Leia commented on the benefit of working when being a mother as follows:

I think that I'm more energetic in the evenings even though I may be tired after the day at work. I'm more energetic, more focus on the kids in the evening when I go back home. When I'm at home the full day, then... maybe after a while, it's... It's difficult to explain, but... (sign) Yeah... It makes it a bit boring. Um... So yeah... (Erina)

In addition, doing housework after a long day of intense intellectual work could offer the women a means of relaxation, as with the case of Emma.

In the same vein, having home duties (and especially having spent over a year at home) could benefit the women's work, i.e., home benefits work. Firstly, it makes the women enjoy working and being at work more because it saves them from the monotony of doing the domestic work all day and fulfill the women's needs for socialization, intellectual stimuli, peace and self-time. This could translate to the women being more inspired and motivated at work as described by Leia.

At home, often you don't have other adults around. So you miss, you know, that type of social contact, and then don't have time to read, you know, read interesting articles or, you know, really focus on things and think about things. So then when at work, you have the chance to do those things... You really enjoy them more, and you kind of have more to give and... you appreciate it more. So, you have more energy, in that sense... (Leia)

Secondly, with the heightened home duties and work time restriction, the women are forced to be more focus and efficient at work in order to deliver in their tasks as employees. As discussed in the section 4.3. *The Time Management*, the women nowadays have neither the flexibility nor willingness to prolonging their work day at the office because they need to pick up the babies from the daycare and/or want to reserve the hours after work for caring and “catching up” with their babies. Trying to be efficient at work, the women are likely to improve their skills in time management, prioritization and organization, all of which are considered valuable and necessary skills for an employee.

I would say that this efficiency is one [advantage of being a mother at work]. Because I think that in many cases, I don't say it's always the case, but I think that at least the mothers are forced to be very efficient... I think that I've become a much better employee. Um... I think [motherhood] helps you prioritize, it makes you efficient. (Leia)

It [being a working mother] has maybe given me this drive to do things efficiently and like... within the specific working hours. So, it has definitely sort of focused my management of life and work (laugh) and like of specific tasks. (Emma)

In short, the contrast between paid work and domestic work would add variations to the women's life. In such cases, work could be considered as a retreat place for the women from their home life where they recharge themselves to come back stronger, and vice versa.

4.6. Summary Of Findings

To summarize, this thesis discovered five main themes in answering the set research question of "*How do employed mothers in Finland experience and manage returning to work post maternity leaves?*". The themes are: (1) *The Simultaneous Sense Of Sorrow And Joy*, (2) *The Enablers For Mothers' Working In Finland*, (3) *The Time Management*, (4) *The Sense Of Guilt*, and (5) *Work And Home Benefit Each Other*.

The first theme of *The Simultaneous Sense Of Sorrow And Joy* refers to the mix of emotions the women experienced during their returning to work. In specific, while the participants found it emotionally difficult to leave their babies, they also felt happy to go back to work after the maternity leaves since work is an important source of self-fulfillment for them. The more isolated the women were from other social interactions and intellectual work, the happier they would be to go back to work. Additionally, the women also felt happy to receive recognition for their efforts at work.

The second theme of *The Enablers For Mothers' Working In Finland* discusses the contextual factors of the Finnish environment that positively influence the women's experiences of going back to work post maternity leaves and of working in general. The theme comprises of the childcare arrangement support from the societal level, the organizations' support from the work organizational level and the husbands'/ partners' support from the home level that altogether help the women return to work and combine work and home. The gender role ideologies hold in the society could be observed with this theme. First, the role of women's working is valued and thus facilitated at the society level with the universal childcare system and at the organizational level with the equal treatments at the workplace towards male and female

employees regardless of their marital status. Second, the progressive equal gender role ideologies at home is evident with the women's husbands'/ partners' engagement in domestic work.

The third theme of *The Time Management* characterizes the struggles of the women regarding the time dimension of their life and the measures they have been taking to better manage their time. Specifically, upon becoming mothers, the women have less time for work and for themselves due to the rising childcare responsibilities. Wanting to have both career and family, the women seek to manage this time constraint by trying to make more time for work and home while sacrificing their self-time, using commercial services for some domestic work, trying to be more efficient at work and at home by means of focusing, prioritizing and compromising, as well as exerting close control over their schedules and the family's ones.

The fourth theme of *The Sense of Guilt* encapsulates the women's guilt towards both their work and their babies when returning to work post maternity leaves. Yet, between the said two types of guilt, the women's sense of guilt towards the babies is found to be more profound than their sense of guilt towards work. Additionally, for the women, most of their guilt seems to be related to the time dimension of their life and related to their good employee and good mother ideologies. In combating the guilty feelings, the women often resort to self-reasoning and talking with family members and friends.

The final theme of *Work And Home Benefit Each Other* portrayed another side of the women's work-family balancing story: instead of simply fighting over each other, work could benefit the home life and the other way around. Particularly, switching between the two different roles keeps the women stimulated and inspired them to focus and do more in each sphere.

5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

With this thesis, I aim to uncover how well-educated employed mothers in Finland experience and manage returning to work post maternity leaves. For the purpose, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight Finnish women with university degrees who have returned to work for less than two years after their maternity leaves, and performed a thematic analysis on their true verbatim interview transcripts. As a result, five main themes of their experiences were identified, namely: (1) *The Simultaneous Sense Of Sorrow And Joy*, (2) *The Enablers For Mothers' Working In Finland*, (3) *The Time Management*, (4) *The Sense Of Guilt*, and (5) *Work And Home Benefit Each Other*. These five themes support the existing literature on the women's returning to work after childbirth and maternity leaves experiences, and at the same time, contribute to enriching the field by looking into the specific context of Finland and gaining insights of the women's experiences in the country. In the following sections, I will discuss the mentioned five findings in light with the current literature.

As for the first theme, *The Simultaneous Sense Of Sorrow And Joy*, it was discovered that while the participants found it emotionally difficult to leave their babies, they all felt happy to return to work after the maternity leaves. This finding confirms the existing literature that paid work is important for women in Finland (Lehto & Sutela, 2009) as cited by Närvi (2012) since it is a source of self-fulfillment for them. In specific, in line with Tai's (2017) study, work presents the women with the intellectual stimuli they need as well as some peace and self-time, i.e., a break from childcare. Moreover, this study also found out that work provides the women with opportunities for socializing and thus help fulfill this psychological need of theirs.

With respect to the second theme, *The Enablers For Mothers' Working In Finland*, as said the women's return to work post maternity leaves in Finland was facilitated by three enablers on the societal level, the organizational level, and the home level, which are: the childcare arrangement, the organizations' support, and the husband's/ partner's support. Regarding the first enabler, the possibility to secure a good childcare arrangement for their babies is a fundamental condition that must be met for the women to return to work. This agrees with the

current literature on the topic like those discussed of Klerman and Leibowitz (1990), Barrow (1999), Gregory (2011); Boyd et al. (2013) and Murray (2015). In spite of its imperfections, the universal childcare system in Finland plays a crucial role in supporting the women's going back to work post maternity leaves in the country.

Concerning the second enabler of the organizations' support, the women generally enjoyed the organizations' favorable formal policies in regard to flexible working hours, remote work and leaves, as well as the managers' and colleagues' understanding and support of their work and life situations with the small babies. These forms of support from the workplace are connected to the common organization practice and culture in Finland where women are valued as employees as equally as men, and autonomy and flexibility at work are usually encouraged. While the formal policies type of support from the organizations was largely a given, the informal support from the managers and colleagues was not always guaranteed. Yet, the informal support could have great impacts on the women's experiences as described in the *Findings* chapter. The described importance of the informal support at work and its related issues are in agreement with the discussed studies of Wayne et al. (2006), Premeaux et al. (2007), Moe and Shandy (2010); Fiksenbaum, (2014); Pedulla and Thebaud (2015) as well as Wayne and Casper (2016).

As for the last enabler, the husband's/ partner's support for the women in terms of sharing the domestic workload and offering emotional and mental support was found to be important. This supports Välimäki et al.'s (2009) study on the husband's roles. Although some husbands/ partners supported their wives/ partners more than the others with the domestic work, all of the husbands/ partners of the participants strongly supported the women mentally. Within this topic of concern, paternity leaves and parental leaves taken by the husbands/ partners were observed to act as a catalyst for the husbands'/ partners' active engagement in domestic work.

In discussion for this second theme of *The Enablers For Mothers' Working In Finland*, I argue that these enablers are strong in Finland, which greatly help the women's returning to work post maternity leaves and the women's working in general in the country. It can be seen that on the

societal and organizational levels, women are considered valuable employees and important assets for organizations in line with the egalitarian gender roles ideology of women's and men's working which was formed during the long history of women's being actively engaging in paid work in Finland as previously discussed in this paper. Thus, the society and organizations care about the women's needs and try to help meet such needs with formal policies like childcare, flexible work arrangement, leaves, etc. On the home level, men in Finland are engaged in domestic work, some engage to a great extent. This helps alleviate the burden on the women's shoulders as they are not expected and do not have to do everything at home on top of their paid work. Furthermore, it is accepted and considered normal in Finland for men to take paternity leave and/or parental leave to care for the home while the women work. Most husbands/ partners of the participants took paternity leaves and/or parental leaves. This activeness of men at home could indicate that people are now moving towards a more equal labor division in the household as Perälä-Littunen (2007), Närvi (2012) and Neilson and Stanfors (2013) expected. It is these robust enablers that set Finland apart from other cases found in the literature. However, it must be noticed that the husbands/ partners of the participants are also well-educated. Thus, their attitudes and practices regarding domestic work may differ from other groups of men in the country and thus could not represent the whole state's male population. I hypothesize that the higher education they have, the more likely it would be that they have a positive attitude and practices when it comes sharing the domestic work with their wives/ partners.

With regard to the third theme, *The Time Management*, the mothers' lack of time in all aspect of their life and their concern about and strategies for time management stood out during the interviews and data analysis. Since the women often need to pick up the babies from the daycares, they cannot stay late at work anymore, hence the lack of time for work. In addition, the women also experience a lack of time at home due to the amount of housework and especially childcare responsibility. These two spheres of work and home take up most of the women's time and cut into their self-time. Due to the said time restriction, women could be seen to always seek to manage their time, e.g., work outside of normal office hours, increase efficiency at work and home by means of prioritization and compromisation, tightly control one own's schedule as well as the family's, etc. I argue that this time constraint lies at the very core of the women's experiences of returning to work post maternity leaves. Yet, the theme was not

picked up in the literature reviewed for this thesis. Hence, this thesis contributes to the current literature in this regard.

Concerning the fourth theme, *The Sense Of Guilt*, the women were noted to be struggling with different guilts towards work and their babies during their returning to work. As previously discussed in the *Findings* chapter, there seems to be a constant battle between the good employee and the good mother ideologies that happens within the women's minds. These two ideologies strongly and concretely compete on the time dimension in the women's life, i.e., the time conflict is indeed a manifestation of the good employee and good mother ideologies conflict. It is these two ideologies that influence the women's actual doing, e.g., trying to make more time for both work and home each while consciously maintaining the border between them, and trying to be as efficient as possible to deliver as much as they could within the time they had. The conflicts between the good employee and good mother ideologies and the strategies used by the women to manage them constantly interact with each other. When the women could not manage the conflicts between the good employee and good mother ideologies, they would experience guilts and problems at work and/or home. In the worst-case scenario, the women would change their jobs to regain the balance in their life like two of the participants did. On the contrary, if the conflicts could be managed, the women would experience a life balance or, even better, benefit from switching roles between the two spheres of their life, which leads up to the next theme.

As for the fifth and final theme, *Work And Home Benefit Each Other*, the mutual-benefit between work and home was observed in many cases in this study. I argue that this mutual-benefit only happens if the conflicts between the roles that the women play at work and at home are managed. The popularity of the mutual-benefit cases means that the women's strategies worked. Here I would take the liberty to also attribute this to the strong enablers presented in the local context as discussed. Since without such a favorable environment, the women's managing strategies would be unlikely to work as well as they did. For example, without the ease to obtain a flexible work hour arrangement, the women would not be able to go to work early and leave early and still be counted as working work full-time. This finding is a new found

in the literary realm, and thus contributes to enrich our understanding of the topic.

As demonstrated, this study confirms and expands the literature on the mothers' experiences of going back to work after a period being out of it due to childbirth and maternity leaves. In specific, the study holistically examines the women's experiences firmly rooted in the context of the Finnish society by looking at the work, home and self aspects of their lives. In short, the returning to work experiences of women after childbirth and maternity leaves are indeed complex ones where the women struggle with challenges on various levels. Yet, despite the remaining issues, the women's experiences could be said to be positive overall in Finland thanks to the strong enablers' present in the environment. Hence, the thesis could be useful for people who want to study the reality of the mothers' experiences of returning to work, especially in the context of Finland.

In line with the findings and discussion, this study also presents certain practical implications at the societal and organizational levels. First, the study calls for the society's and organizations' recognition of the issues the women may encounter when returning to work after their maternity leaves. While the women want to do well at work and at home, they could and often experience issues like being disoriented and emotionally struggling at work when first return (especially when there had been great changes in terms of personnel at the workplace), facing uncertainty in what are expected and how they should behave, having issues combining work and home time-wise, feeling internally torn with guilts towards work and home, etc. It could take a long time (up to 6 months or a year as shared by participants) or worse, not working at all to leave the women to navigate through the said situations alone. Instead, the society and organizations should open the conversation with the returned mothers and explicitly inform them (again) of their rights as employees, what they could do, what they are not required and/or expected to do when facing certain situations, e.g., the babies' getting sick. In addition, the organization should be patient when the women first came back and give them some time to catch up with the workplace again, especially in the case of great changes at the workplace compared to the situation before the women left for their maternity leaves. It is important that the women feel

welcomed when they are back at the workplace and that they are listened to. In fact, I suggest treating the women mentally as new employees when they return. When being interviewed for this study, the women expressed a yearning wish to have their returns and situations recognized by the organizations.

Second, the study calls for the support for and promoting of the substantial paternity leave and fathers' taking parental leaves. As pointed out earlier in this study, the leaves taken by the fathers help them experience and understand the reality of the home life with a small baby/babies by staying at home and taking care of the baby/babies and the housework. Having experienced and understood the hectic home life, men would be more likely to help their partners out with domestic work. Thus, the fathers' leaves act as a catalyst in men's engaging in domestic. This helps alleviate the burden on the women and better facilitate their combining work and home. Moreover, it is worth noticing that, similarly to women, men could have the want and need to be with their babies too. Fathers' leaves answer this want and need.

Third, the study calls for offering the returning mothers opportunities to have an induction week to work. The induction could be a specially arranged one for the returning mothers or a common one taken by and with the newcomers to the organization. As presented earlier in this paper, women often need time to direct their orientation back to work after a long time disengaging from work during their maternity leaves, to catch up with the changes at the workplace, to regain the momentum of working, as well as to make friends and find their support groups at work. When done right, an induction helps in this regard.

Having discussed the knowledge constructed during the research, I find it now crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The first limitation comes from the epistemology stand I took. Since I adopted the social constructionist approach, this study only presents my interpretation of the research problem. Essentially, my background and pre-understanding of the topic could have influenced my research process and my final interpretations. (Calás & Smircich, 2006). The second limitation of this study roots in the sample of participants I used. For this study, only eight white, well-educated and married/ cohabiting women from different

industries whose stories were listened to and analyzed. The experiences could be different with a different sample. Lastly, the fact that I am not a native in the studied context could also influence how the participants shared their stories with me, i.e., what was being said and how it was being said. Especially, the language restriction must be noted in this study. While the study is conducted in English, neither the participants nor the author is English native speaker.

In terms of suggestions for further studies, I highly recommend taking on a different sample to further study the topic in the context of Finland. In specific, future studies could look into how non-native women working and living in Finland or single mothers experience returning to work post maternity leaves, or focus on studying the women's experiences in a specific industry. When analyzing the transcripts for this study, I noticed possible industry-specific traits in the women's experiences, and thus it is worth investigating. Furthermore, it would be interesting to study the opposite sex's side of the story and/or study the couples' stories, as well.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Interview guide

1. Background information

- Please tell me about yourself: what is your age, education, and work history?
- Please tell me about your husband/ partner: what is his job?
- Please tell me about your children: how many children do you have? What are their sexes? How old are they? When did your latest child start his or her daycare?
- How did you and your husband/ partner decide to have children?

2. The maternity leaves

- Could you please tell me about your time at home during the maternity leaves?
 - How long was it?
 - What did you and your husband/ partner do during your maternity leave?
 - What were the experiences like? How did you feel during the maternity leave?
- Before your maternity leave, how much planning for your work and career did you do?

3. The decision to return to work

- Please tell me about your decision to return to work after your maternity leave:
 - How long have you been back to work for?
 - What factors affected your decision? What were your concerns?
 - How were you feeling?

4. The experiences of work

- Could you please narrate how returning to work took place, and what the experiences (incl. practicality issues and your emotions) were like?
- How were you feeling during your return to work?
- Did becoming a mother affect your work? If so, how did it affect your work?
- How did you manage the challenges (if arise during the interview)?

5. The experiences at the workplace

- Please tell me about your experience of the workplace when you returned:
 - How things possibly evolved when you returned to work?
 - How were the interactions between you and the people at work like?

- Have you noticed any advantages of being a mother at work? In which kinds of situation?
- Have you noticed any disadvantages of being a mother at work? In which kinds of situation?
- How did you manage the challenges (if arise during the interview)?
- Did you receive any support at the workplace during this time? What was the organization roles in affecting your experience?

6. The experiences at home

- Please describe insdetail a typical day in your life after you returned to work?
- How do you experience being a working mother?
 - Does anything come up in specific? What incidents standout?
 - How did you feel during the time/ your return to work?
- How did you manage the challenges (if arise during interview)?
- How did you manage the practicality of daily life at home?
- What were the the roles of your spouse and other family members?
- How do you negotiate the changes at home with your spouse?

7. Reflection & wrap-up

- Having reflected back on your experiences, what do you think is the most important factor supporting your returning to work?
- Do you think that maternity influence your career prospects?
- Have you shared all that is significant about the experience of returning to work?